TWO ON THE TRAIL

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Author: E. E. Cowper

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Motionless before her stood a figure wrapped in the usual Indian blanket. p. 100

TWO ON THE TRAIL
A STORY OF CANADA SNOWS

BY

E. E. COWPER

AUTHOR or "THE MOONRAKERS," "KITTIWAKE'S CASTLE,"
"CREW OF THE SILVER FISH," ETC.

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY

W. PAGET

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TWO ON THE TRAIL

CHAPTER I

THE LOG HOUSE

"Do you suppose anything has happened to him?" asked the boy; "do you, Nell?"

He had been asking that question a great many times a day for a good many days. Every time he asked it his sister said, "Oh no, of course not," and set about any sort of work to prove she was not thinking anxious thoughts. At last, however, her answer was rather slower in coming, and on this particular occasion no answer came till David touched her arm.

"Do you, Nell?" he urged.

"I don't know. I shouldn't think so," she said, but instead of getting busy she sat still and stared at the red-hot stove, her strong hard hands clasped round her knees, and a frown on her forehead--actually doing nothing at all but just think!

This state of things was surprising enough to make "Da," as she called her young brother, more persistent than ever. He was a big, strong, square-shouldered boy of twelve, or thereabouts, and his sister was to him very much what the Captain of the First Eleven might be to a boy in an English school. She was wonderful. She could do anything and everything that he understood and that came into his life, as well--better than anyone he knew. Besides the jobs that men left over--in his experience--and which Nell did as cleverly as the mother who had died about five years before.

Da had entire confidence in her, and who shall say he had not a right to, considering all that he saw and knew about her!

She was fifteen; a head and shoulders taller than himself, and apparently as strong as their father. Her dark red hair was short as his own. That is to say, as short as hair can be where people have no shops and do their own hair-cutting. Her eyes were greenish grey and sharp as the keen, still eyes of the grey lynx that got trapped once in a way in the snares set for mink and martens.

David admired her hair and eyes with all his heart, chiefly because she was the only member of their small family like that--he and his father having darkish eyes and hair. Nell was supposed to have taken after a Scottish ancestress, with a vigorous character, not after the fair little mother with yellow hair and blue eyes; and when people start off like that in an independent manner they usually take a line of their own all through.

In fact, Nell Lindsay was a girl to be trusted; dependable and clever, which was a very good thing, because she needed every bit of it in the present crisis.

She and her young brother were alone in the log house--or shack--more than a hundred miles from any settlement. The two nearest were Abbitibbi House on the lake, away to the eastward, and Brunswick House, north on Moose River. Possibly the distance was equal, and Nell calculated it at a hundred and fifty miles either way.

That is nothing much in a country of railways, or even of good roads, but it is a long way over trackless waste, pathless forest, and snow--without guide, without help from human company.

When Nell did not answer David's persistent questions any longer, it was because she was thinking about the one hundred and fifty miles--and more--that lay between the shack and friends. It was friends she wanted. There were men nearer than that, but Nell was not sure they were friends, and therein lay the whole trouble, you see.

Over all that wilderness of forest and waste, river and lake, there lived trappers who had marked out certain districts as their own particular trapping grounds. Some were Indians, some white men who had taken up this life for the freedom and profit of making money by selling pelts--that is skins--to the traders who bought them up for the big Companies.

It was an understood thing that the trappers did not poach on each other's grounds. If they tried they ran the risk of being shot by the rightful owner. They were rough men, and followed rough laws of their own making.

The traders came round in early spring and bought up the fur. Or perhaps the trappers took great bundles of pelts away to the trading posts, got their money and spent it enjoying themselves to make up for the hardships of winter. But Andrew Lindsay was never one of these. He bought his flour, tea, bacon, and tobacco from the traders, sold his pelts and kept his money, so that after a bit it came to be common talk that he had saved a lot and hidden it in, or near, the log house. He was not the sort of man to imagine that people might think this. He loved the wild lands for the beauty and grandeur, and hated the work of an office and the close life in towns. This feeling had driven him north from San Francisco when he was first married. Here he had been in the Dominion, winter and summer, ever since, but he had not lost sight of the importance of education for his boy, and the money was saving up for that. David was to be an engineer. The years of work had paid very well and Nell knew her father's plan. Also she knew about the money, and that this was perhaps the last winter they would spend in the shack among the woods on the steep hills that ran for over a thousand miles from the northern frontier of Ontario to the Watchish Mountains in North-East Territory. The girl was content either way. Whatever her father decided was right, she thought. The winter was coming to an end very soon--it was the last week in March--and he had gone on his last round to look at traps on the more distant runways. The last, because fur gets thin and poor, and loses its thick beauty when the terrible cold of winter is giving before spring.

And then, when it was the last thing they would have thought of, this blow had fallen--Lindsay had not come back. He had gone out into the glittering light of the snowy world, with his gun, his double-lined fur sleeping bag, and food enough for four days. *Eight* days had passed, and he had not returned.

Now that is how matters stood on a certain afternoon as the grey dusk began to creep through the trees and close in round the lonely log house. It was a difficult position for the girl, but she never for a moment gave way to impatience.

This house of theirs was as different from an English home as could well be--which mattered not at all to the young Lindsay pair, because they had no idea what an English house was like.

This house was built of rough logs--one big room in the middle and either

end partitioned off, thus making two small bedrooms. This was considered luxurious, as most of the trappers had but one room in the shack, for sleeping and eating, and work, too. The walls were just rough logs inside as well as out, the cracks between were stuffed in with mud and the coarse moss that grows up north. Over this skins were hung, on the floor big skins were laid. From the rafters bacon hung and onions grown in the summer. In the corners stood sacks of potatoes and flour. The former is very important food in a country that is frozen up about seven months of the year, because when you cannot get green stuff there is risk of scurvy, and raw potatoes are the cure for that. They must be kept from the least touch of frost, of course, otherwise they go rotten.

On the floor in one corner was a pile of skins smaller and more valuable than the grey wolf, the black bear, and the yellow puma of the hills, that hung on the walls.

As Nell sat by the big stove thinking, her keen eyes wandered from one possession to another. Finally they rested on the dog and considered him thoughtfully.

Now this dog was not the kind you would expect to find in a trapper's hut, because he was close-haired, while the dogs used to pull sledges in all parts of the north lands have thick coats and bushy tails. They are called "huskies" and have a lot of wolf in their composition. In the very far north they train in teams of four up to twelve and are wonderfully clever at their work, taking a great pride in it, and refusing to let other dogs take their place in the line. But if they are strong and clever they are also exceedingly savage, and if one of their number gets badly hurt--so that he cannot defend himself--they set upon him and eat him, just as wolves do when one of the pack is disabled.

"Robin Lindsay," as Nell called him, was in no way that kind of dog. He was nearly black, with a broad chest and smooth, close coat. He had ears that drooped forward like a hound's, a wrinkled forehead, and wise brown eyes. Certainly he was all sorts of dog, but it was all of the best, which mattered a great deal in that terribly lonely place. Andrew Lindsay had brought him home one day, four years ago, having bought him from a man who was going to make an end of what he thought was a useless puppy.

Now he lay on the thick grey skin of a wolf, his nose between his paws--watching Nell's face with little twitches of his thoughtful forehead. He knew there was something the matter, and waited.

"What shall you do, Nell, if Dad doesn't come back to-night?" asked David, stopping in his work of carving a tiny little sled out of wood. "You'll have to do something, shan't you?"

Nell got up from her seat on the bench, walked slowly to the door, slid back the heavy bolt, opened the door and looked out. A raw chill entered and seemed

to creep into every corner on the instant. Robin rose to his feet, stalked after his mistress and sniffed the doorstep enquiringly.

"I thought so," said the girl as she shut out the bitter dusk.

"Thought what?"

"I thought it was snowing, and it is."

"I suppose you mean that will wipe out Dad's trail? Is that it?" asked the boy.

"It wouldn't make a scrap of difference to Robin, he'd follow a trail through inches of snow. You simply can't bluff him. He always knows. No, I wasn't thinking about the trail exactly--not in that sort of way, anyhow--it's not much good hunting a trail when you pretty well know where it's going to lead you at the start. I mean, Da, that I guess where Dad is. When I'm certain I'll tell you most likely. Matter of fact I was *hoping* for snow."

"You were!"

"It'll come in useful if I'm not mistaken," said Nell in a conclusive tone.

David stared at her, puzzled. He believed she was the cleverest girl alive, but he did not even remotely understand what she was talking about. On the face of the situation snow was the most tiresome impediment to any sort of move. He knew it might be expected now, because when the bitterest, glittering frost began to give way to the cold that comes between winter and spring, the snow was softer underfoot and falls might be constantly expected. Slight as the change was, the wind had not the same icy breath. Not that one felt warmer, on the contrary, the faint tinge of damp made the air cold beyond description, but probably there was not quite the same danger of frost-bite for the face and hands.

David knew all these things as a matter of course. He had been born and brought up in the country. But he did not see what the snow could have to do with the present trouble! However, it was better to go on carving his sled than show ignorance, so he waited, glancing up at his sister every few seconds, as she paced slowly away from the stove and back to it again, in a kind of thoughtful sentry-go.

Then Robin growled, deep down in his throat. He had not settled down again on his bed, but sat up watching Nell's promenade. He had lifted his muzzle and sniffed the air with a delicate, sensitive movement as though he were feeling something very gently.

Then he growled--very low and deep.

CHAPTER II

A SURPRISE THAT BRINGS SUSPICION

David sprang to his feet and moved towards the door. Neither he nor the girl said or thought for an instant it might be the missing man, because they knew the dog would not have growled in that case.

It was either a stranger or someone Robin was not fond of.

In a few seconds the crunch of snowshoes came to their ears, and then there was a heavy knock on the door.

David gripped Robin by the skin of his neck. The bristles were standing up along his back, and the boy's hold would have been but a slight check had not the animal been very obedient; he was never savage like a husky. As Nell went forward to the door she shifted into convenient position the little automatic pistol that her father insisted on her wearing at all times.

"Who's there?" she asked, as the knock came again.

"Friend, miss," answered a voice from outside. "News of your dad."

Now the voice was not only rough, but it had a foreign tone to it, and Nell's quick mind instantly jumped to the identity of its owner.

"Stenson," she said, over her shoulder to David, "you know Jan Stenson--the one Dad said was 'more Finn than Swede.' He's partner with Barry Jukes on the location up above Abbitibbi little River. Watch out, Da, we've got to be wide awake. Don't say much."

The big bolt was sliding along as she whispered these words quickly--and in a moment the door opened.

"Won't you step inside, Mr. Stenson? What's your news?"

Mr. Jan Stenson stepped inside, and the dog received a smack from David for growling in an undertone, while the man unstrapped his snowshoes, and set them against the wall. He was a short person, not so tall as Nell, but looked as broad as he was high. Of course the clothes he wore emphasised this appearance: skins with fur inwards, and a sort of cap-like hood to the coat, drawn close round the face by a string, and edged all round with little furry tails to keep the freezing wind from the features--otherwise a man gets frost-bite in the nose or cheeks.

Jan Stenson threw back his hood--or "parka," as it is called--and showed a

broad, rather flat face, and close-set eyes that shifted as he talked. Nell asked him to sit down, so he sat on a bench near the stove and smoked tobacco that she offered.

"You can have tea or cocoa," said the girl. "Dad hasn't any use for spirits."

Mr. Stenson chose tea, without thanks. He had a good deal of use for spirits when he could get them--no easy matter in the Dominion!

Then he told the story for which the two were waiting so eagerly.

It seemed that Andrew had reached the border line where his district touched theirs, when he found a very large wild cat caught in a mink trap. Stenson called the beast a "catamount," so Nell knew he meant one of the largest and most savage of the wild cat tribe--about as big as a lynx and in some ways even more powerful. The creature had special value alive--far above the mere skin--because a certain travelling company down east had offered a big price for one--for the Show--uninjured. Therefore it entered Lindsay's mind that here was the chance to do well, and he tried to smother the mad animal down with his sleeping bag, and rope it securely, intending then to free the paw caught in the iron spring. But somehow this plan missed fire. The catamount, frantic with pain, fastened on the man's knee with its terrible fangs and claws, and he was obliged to shoot it, but not before he had suffered very serious injury.

"He made shift to overhaul our shack, but he was about done in. Not a trick left in him. It might be a long job," suggested Mr. Stenson, glancing sideways at the girl, "them catamounts is chock full up with pison--bad as pumas and that like."

"Bad luck indeed," said Nell soberly. "Thank you very much for coming over to tell us. What does Dad want us to do?"

"Looks as though he makes out to have you both over at the Abbitibbi. That's what I come along for--to see if you'd do it. He's got to be done for, sure enough. You and him and the boy can have the shack. It's no odds to me and Barry. There's the wood-house lean-to where we can roll up. We've done worse many's the time. Why not? You think it out and look at it that your Dad wants someone about. It may be weeks if he don't get proper attendance, and he makes out to be off soon as the snow clears. Eh? Well, he won't do that if his leg's left to get worse. Them catamounts is full up with pison."

This was rather a long speech on the whole for Jan Stenson. He did not "make out to talk," as he would have said of himself. But he was apparently earnest about this, and kept on impressing the urgency of it in jerky sentences between puffs at his pipe.

After a pause Nell asked.

"Did Dad send us any message?"

"Said he hoped you'd come along. He don't find no treat in layin' up in a

bunk, when he wants to clear up the traps."

"No, poor Dad," agreed Nell thoughtfully. "Let me think." She paused, and sat very quiet as she stroked Robin's smooth head. Under her fingers she could feel his throat move as he growled without sound.

David looked from one to the other as the talk went on. He did not like the trapper, but he thought he and Jukes were very kind in this instance and meant well. He wondered what Nell would do, though it certainly seemed as though there was not much choice in the matter. Presently she broke silence by asking exactly when the accident had occurred. According to Stenson, Lindsay had been nearly a week laid up, but they had been too busy to give notice earlier. The man said nothing about the distance--a matter of thirty miles--because it was not considered anything much in a country of great distances. Men with a sled and a dog team would travel on snowshoes thirty miles a day and more without considering it an out of the way effort. And Stenson was, what is called, "travelling light," with nothing but a pack on his back, consisting of his sleeping blanket, his gun, and some pemmican (dried pressed meat); he was on his way, he said, to a camp of Indian trappers not far to the north-west. They were some wandering Chippewa, or Ojibway Indians, belonging to the tribes on the big lakes, to the south-west. They travelled away in parties hunting and collecting furs, and the trappers often bought these from them for tea, tobacco, and blankets. There was always a lot of exchange going on and Nell, understanding all about it, did not question Stenson's business.

Still ignoring his invitation she offered him bread--the sour-dough bread she made herself--and meat as well as the tea; he ate without comment, his close-set eyes shifting looks to every part of the room, and everything in it. When he had finished he got up. Then the girl said as though the subject had never been dropped:

"I don't see why you and Barry Jukes couldn't get Dad up home with your sled. He'd pay for loss of time if it comes to that. Why not?"

Stenson shook his head. He said the snow was getting soft, and the ground would be much too rough for an injured man. Besides, they'd sold their dogs, and he and Barry didn't "lay-out" to pull such a load added to a camping outfit, because they'd have to make two days, if not three of it.

"You can't go shifting a man in his state," he said, "not without worse to follow. See here, miss, you get your outfit together, and I'll call in for you the third day from now and take you along. You and the boy and the dog--how's that? It won't be for long. Sight of you will mend up that knee fine. Like enough your Dad will make out to come back home with you in ten days or thereabouts, taking it slow and camping. I know you got a hand sled. We can makeshift to load your traps on that. The dog and I can pull and you can take a hand at pushing."

Thus Jan Stenson explained his ideas as he pulled over his parka, dragged on his big fur mitts, and made ready to go out into the dusk.

"When did you say--exactly?" asked Nell.

"Third day from now," he was fastening on his snowshoes in the doorway. "I lay out to make old Ogâ's camp in three hours. I'll get through business to-morrow and come for you morning after. Nine o'clock more or less, we don't want more than one camp--if that."

"All right," agreed Nell, nodding her head, "don't come sooner, because I shan't be ready. There's a lot to do. I can't risk the potatoes freezing--I'll have to put them in fur bags. Well, good night, Mr. Stenson, and thank you for coming."

It was not David's usual habit to remain silent, but he had been so surprised through this queer visit and so entirely astonished at the ending of it that even after the bolt slid into place he only stared at his sister, turning over twenty questions he wanted to ask, but not asking one.

"So *that's* finished!" said Nell, shutting her teeth together with a snap. Then she threw herself down on the skin rug, leaned her back against the bench, clasped her fingers round her bent knees and concluded, "Now, let me think."

"I wish you weren't always thinking and never saying anything," remarked David. "I want to know about one thousand things, Nell, and you never tell me one! Do you like that chap? *I* don't, and Robin hates him--*bite* him, Rob--hey, bite him!"

There was a mix-up on the floor between the big black hound and the boy. When it settled into peace, Nell asked as though nothing had interrupted:

"Why don't you like Stenson?"

"Oh, I don't know. He's a snake and a rotter. His eyes keep on slewing round. He tells lies. When it comes to that why does old Rob hate him? I say, Nell, are you really going to take that trail on Thursday?"

Nell looked at the boy's earnest eyes, and a little twisted smile curled one corner of her firm mouth.

"No," she said.

"*No*, why--how will you get out of it? I *say*----"

"Easy enough. We shan't be here, my dear."

"Shan't be *here*! Where shall we be then?"

David opened his mouth as well as his eyes when the full force of this surprising news began to sink into his mind.

"Well--with any luck--and God's help, my child--we shall be on the trail for Fort St. Louis. Anyway, either that, or to Brunswick House. I mean to strike the lake at the bottom of the Divide, and make the very straightest trail we can down the river, till we hit the Moose----"

"Great snakes!" gasped David, his eyes shining with excitement, "but, look

here, old girl--aren't you biting off more than you can chew? It's a pretty big proposition, you know. How far to Fort Louis from here?"

"About two hundred miles, but we shall strike the Moose River before that and then we shall be pretty safe, because there are more folk over there." Nell spoke as though it was all settled in her mind, which was comforting to her astonished brother.

"How do you mean *safe*?" he asked.

"From this gang. They are up to something, and I guess what it is."

"You do. What is it then?"

"I've no time to explain now," said the girl, jumping up with an energetic spring, "there's a whole heap to do and no time to do it in, for we ought to get a few winks of sleep to-night or we shall be sleepy on the trail." Then seeing another question on David's tongue, she added, "We must get off early to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER III

NELL MAKES UP HER MIND

Nell Lindsay worked like two people that evening. She put the potatoes into fur bags as she said, and went over everything of value in the shack. She could not stop to talk, but David--admiring her more and more--gathered her plans and intentions from what she said as they worked.

"You see, it didn't come upon me all in one moment," she explained, "because I'd been hacking away at this notion for the last four days really. Ever since Dad didn't come, you see, Da. *If* he didn't come, the only plan was to find out what was wrong from the Chippewas--we could make their camp and ask--and then simply strike the trail for the Fort, because Dad would want us to do that one thing."

David checked with his hands full of potatoes to say:

"But look here--what about Dad now?"

"Well--I don't think I believe all that story. It's got a kind of false feeling in it. Dad may have got his knee hurt, but I'm certain sure, Da, he never meant us to leave this and go over to Abbitibbi Lake with Stenson. I'm *sure* he never did. Probably he said to Stenson, 'as you're bound for Ogâ's camp, just you look in at the shack and tell them I'm here all right'--do you see, Da? He may be lamed up too much to take the trail for a few days, but I believe that's about the length of

it! He only sent us the news. I sort of *feel* that in my mind."

"But what----"

"I'm coming to that," Nell checked him. "Here, put this against the partition, it's warmer than the outside wall. I don't believe they'll freeze so, Da, the worst of the winter is done." She rested a minute, hands on hips, looking round at her labours. Then she took up the tale of her belief in a much lower voice as though she were afraid of being overheard.

"You know about all that money Dad has been saving up to make you into a real good engineer, don't you, Da? Well, it's hidden in this shack and no one knows where it is but Dad and me. It's a good lot, because Dad just kept the fur money year after year, and we buy things from the traders--you know. I rather wanted him to take it all down to the Settlement, but he wouldn't leave us here before Mother went, nor since--so it just had to stay, you see what I mean. Well, these men must know that. They know Dad's been saving up, and they know the money is somewhere. Now I believe their plan is to get us and Robin out of the house, then they'll come and hunt over every inch and steal it."

"They'd get caught and----"

"They can lay it on the Chippewas--Ogâ's camp isn't so far off. He's been shifting round this district quite a while. Don't you see, Da, they can't do a thing if Dad is here--nor if you and I and Robin are here. It's a trick to keep us out of the shack."

Nell's cheeks were scarlet with the energy of her whispered story. When she reached the end of it they paled again.

"*That's* how I seem to see it," she concluded, "and I'm so certain that I mean to clear out with all that money and take it to Fort St. Louis. I want to get twenty-four hours' start of Jan Stenson. I rather hope he may think we've got so scared about Dad that we've gone ahead down east to Abbitibbi."

"What about your trail?" suggested David, fervent interest in every line of his face. He was beginning to understand the amazing plan and the full danger that was driving Nell into it.

"I believe the snow will help us. It will cover the trail."

"Great snakes! Now I see why you were looking out for snow! But, Nell, if we stay here till Dad comes can't we guard the money? It's a jolly big thing taking the trail to Fort Louis. Can't we stick it out here?"

Nell shook her head and her eyes wavered a little from her brother's eager gaze.

"I don't think they'd stop short of--well--real wickedness, Da, if they couldn't get the money by a trick. You must remember they've got Dad as a kind of hostage, and they could say, 'If you don't hand over that cash it'll be all the worse for him,' don't you see? Of course, it would be a risk for them, in the end. But men like that

chance risks. They could get away up north--or to the States. There's room--why, thousands of miles every way. Ten to one they mightn't be caught."

David realised the position entirely. He was full of sense. Moreover, he had been Nell's companion ever since he could walk and talk, and her common sense was notable. He understood, but said no more, for what was the good of talking? their business now was to act.

"I know exactly what Dad would wish us to do," went on Nell, "clear off with that money. Look how he's worked to get it, because you must be properly educated if you are to get to the top in engineering. The only thing that bothered me for a bit was, if they'd do anything to him, supposing they understand we've gone off like that. I thought and thought, and then I saw they certainly would not, because what would be the sense of risking prison for nothing at all! They'll try and catch us right enough, and make off with the money."

"Oh, you think they'll come after us, do you?" said David, stopping short in his silent by-play of ragging the black dog.

"Rather!" agreed Nell firmly.

David's mouth widened into a grin.

"Do you hear that, Robin?" he said cheerfully. "Then the sooner we jolly well hop it the better, for we've a long, long way to Tipperary."

For hours the brother and sister worked, until indeed David was so sleepy that Nell forced him to undress and roll up in his bunk, where in one minute he was soundly unconscious. That was at one o'clock in the morning, when her neat arrangements were nearly completed.

They were to take the hand sled, to be pulled by Robin and David, and pushed by herself. As a rule, a man who pulls--when there is no dog team--passes a rope over his shoulder and holds the end in his hands, then he drags, bending forward. It is fearfully hard work and slow, too. Nell's inventive mind planned a kind of harness for David, who would go first, "breaking trail" with his snowshoes for the feet of the dog who would be nearest the sled. She would go behind the first part of the way, because of the track towards the stream. It would be necessary to hold back the little loaded sled with strength and judgment. Afterwards, if breaking trail proved too hard for David, she would pull and he should push at the back.

It will be understood that Nell intended to save the most valuable of the skins as well as the money. Fortunately these were, as a rule, the smaller ones--marten, sable, mink, and beaver. She made close packages of these pelts and fastened them on the sled, together with a frying-pan, a billy-can for making tea, a small, sharp axe, and their two sleeping bags, double skins with the fur inwards. For food she took as little as she thought safe--for a reason to be explained presently--and nothing cumbersome--for instance, no flour--only dried beans, ba-

con, tea, and the compressed meat, called pemmican, which is not very nice, but very nourishing, as it is pressed into little bags and a very little contains a lot of meat.

She took some tobacco as a precaution, supposing they should come across Indians and want to give a present, and she took flint and steel as well as matches, in case the latter got damp by any accident.

Lastly she strapped in place her great treasure, a small Winchester repeating rifle that her father had given her and taught her to shoot with, and ammunition. She had told David she wasn't going to leave it behind to be possibly stolen, but her intention was to use it for the defence of that precious money if need be. Besides the little rifle, both she and David carried automatic pistols; long and careful practice had made them good shots--it is necessary to know how to protect oneself in a wild country.

As Nell sat by the stove making harness from strips of hide she thought a good deal about the money and how she was to hide it. Very little of it was gold. Nearly all was in dollar bills. She passed in review a dozen hiding-places, but dismissed one after another, finally deciding that the only safe place would be upon her own body. Of course, she realised that if she were caught that would be suspected, but they must be put somewhere and she could defend herself. There was one plan that kept on coming back into her mind. That was to hide the money in the log house. Leave it behind carefully concealed, and lead the hunters off on a false trail. She thought of all the places in which it could be put and could not help knowing that any place inside the log house would be bound to be discovered.

At the present time the money was laid in a recess under the floor, which was made of logs, more or less flattened on the top. The hunters could, if they wanted, try everyone of these boards in a fairly short time. They could search the berths, empty out the potato sacks--Nell sincerely hoped they wouldn't because of the potatoes! The only real hiding-place would be a hole in the ground outside the house, but how could she do that when the ground was covered with snow? You can't put back snow without leaving traces of your work, and besides the ground was hard as wood.

The more she went over these things in her mind, the more definitely she saw that she must carry the money.

"They'll come and find we are gone," murmured Nell, ticking off the events with one finger on the spread out fingers of her other hand, "or *he* will, anyway. He'll think I'm scared about Dad and have gone on ahead--I'll fasten up a paper saying, 'Gone on,' that'll be true, anyway." Her mouth twisted into a smile. "I'll fasten up the paper on the door, *outside*. Then, he'll break it open most likely, and hunt over every inch of the place. Then, he'll fix up that I've got the money on me. Then, he'll sprint off to Abbitibbi and get there in one day. Then, he'll find we

never came and both of them will make out to follow. Two men travelling light can go very fast. They'll just carry a pack--but they'll come back here to get on to our trail like enough, sure to."

She had used up all her fingers, and the busy hands lay in her lap as she thought it all over. There was a shadow over her keen eyes, for she could not hide from herself that the chance was rather a poor one. Indeed, were it not for the two days and more of start there would not be much chance at all.

Two trappers, the hardiest, toughest men on the Continent, used to miles of travel at great speed, travelling light, and following after a big fortune in dollar bills to be had for the taking, were bound to overtake herself and David and the sled! They would not go half as fast, and they must rest--for David's sake. After all, he was only twelve, and no boy of twelve, however strong, can outlast a tough man in his prime.

It was the start she was counting on, and the fact that the men would make so sure of catching them that they might not put out full effort. These trappers would do the distance in four days, going fast--at least, they often did when in haste--while she and David would take eight days. It was not a cheering calculation, but--she was looking at chances, as has been said before. Possibly snow, and a lost trail. Lastly, the farther they two went the more likely would they be to hap on "folk." On the Moose River there were many locations. Life would be stirring. She might strike friends and human dwellings.

Certainly, then, she must carry the money.

CHAPTER IV

THE HOWL OF THE WOLF

Presently Nell stood up and stretched, yawning a little, for she was sleepy. She looked round on her work and knew that all was completed except--the one thing. By a sort of instinct she stood quite still listening. There was no sound, but the crackle of wood in the stove and the sighing of wind round the house. She was glad of that crackling, it had a friendly feeling.

Having satisfied herself that all was safe, and the big bolts shot home into the staples, she took down a pick that they often used for breaking the hard ground, and then dragged back the big black bearskin spread on the floor by the stove. Just as it was rolled up she started nervously--someone moving! She had

forgotten Robin, who had followed David into the small room at the end, and now--perhaps hearing strange movements on her part--came back to see what was happening. He walked across in a dignified manner, sat down on his haunches at the edge of the nearest rug, and then, turning his head slowly, gazed at the door.

Poor Nell, rather burdened by the weight of these events, felt a glow of affection towards the wise dog. She had not remembered him oddly enough for quite a long while, except as a little horse for the sled. Now as she looked over at him she knew she had a partner of value. The job seemed much less formidable, and she fixed the sharp point of the pick between the floor boards with a much lighter heart. She knew exactly where the place was, her father had shown her the secret of the hiding-place, one piece fitting over another so neatly and the rough bark hiding joins. A person who did not know would have to get the whole line up on the chance of finding one loose one.

There was the money, tied up in packets and stowed in two bags made of soft deerskin. Nell took it out, and heartily wished there was less of it! It was not heavy, of course, because it was paper. Also, from time to time her father had changed a parcel of small bills for one larger one, so there was not nearly as much as might have been supposed to represent so many years' savings.

Before going to work on the hiding part of the business, the girl put back the log, knocked it firmly into place and put the bearskin over it. Then she gathered up the two bags, and stood holding them thoughtfully as her fingers ran over the bulk and shape of the paper.

At that moment her attention was drawn to Robin by his action. He moved slowly over to the door, and with drooping head blew sniffing breath along the lower part of it. He made no sound, but the hackles on his neck rose stiffly, and the snow squeezing in under the door was blown out by his breath.

Then, from the forest came the far-off howl of a husky dog--or a wolf.

Nell knew that the huskies in an Indian camp will howl in the night for hours. All of them together, too. The most mournful and tragic sound, though they are not unhappy. In the very coldest weather they will bury themselves in the snow--especially when they are on the Long Trail--bury themselves entirely and so sleep warm. But in the camps they will wander round about and in and out, fighting with each other and howling in chorus as their ancestors the wolves must have done in far-away days when all this great snow country was wild as the Barren Lands up in the north near the Circle.

Nell listened, startled. Why should a husky dog be away out there by itself? It was so unlikely that she settled this must be a lone wolf. But why did it howl? They seldom did that unless they were in full cry, a pack of them on the track of a deer. Also wolves were not very plentiful about this part; though, of course, they might come when driven by hunger--ravenous, and savage.

"Well, it doesn't matter," thought the girl, and she spoke to Robin gently. "Only a wolf, old man. He won't interfere with us."

Even as she stopped speaking, the wolf howled again. This time it was nearer. Robin scratched at the foot of the door and snuffed again heavily, but he did not growl. That was reassuring, because Nell knew he would have growled had it been an enemy--but why didn't he growl at a wolf? That seemed odd. Wolf or husky would have been equally objectionable to Robin.

These thoughts flashed through the girl's mind, the while she pushed the leather bags under the package of pelts, looked to the priming of her little weapon, and pulled the hood of her parka up to cover her head and face. Not only for protection from cold did she do this, but for disguise also in a way, because, as she was dressed like a man in leather breeches with the fur inwards and leather moccasins--or leggings with boots to them--being so tall and strong she would at once be mistaken for a man when the parka tails fell round her face.

All this took but a couple of minutes; Nell always moved quickly. Then she grasped the bolt, pushing Robin aside with her foot and talking to him in a low voice.

"We must have a look, eh, boy?" she said. And at that instant the dreary howl came from the back of the log house, close where the wood was thickest and the hill rose steeply.

"Queer," said Nell to the dog, "there's something more in this than meets the eye--for the matter of that, it doesn't meet the eye at all, does it, Robin? Hope it won't wake Da; he'll want to come out if he hears."

But David slept; he was tired.

The girl opened the door and slipped out into the snow. She held Robin by the collar till such time as it might be necessary to let him go, and together they went to the end of the shack.

No one to be seen. No sound but the wind in the dry boughs above. Nell listened intently, then she turned her head and looked back towards the door; after all, it was open and she did not like to go on round the house. Robin must go, she would stop this side.

As her hand loosed from his neck, the big dog bayed once, a deep note, and disappeared into the wood. Nell went back towards the door her ears alert as any wild thing of the woods. Also her eyes! In spite of the darkness, which was thick and starless, the snow made a paler background. On that it seemed to Nell that she saw a moving shadow close to the house. Not tall. Rather close to the ground. She sprang forward swiftly, but the shadow was quicker; she saw it reach the door and slip inside.

The girl was not frightened, but she checked speed and approached the door with extra caution. She could not be sure whether this weird shadow was an

animal or a human being. In the latter case the bolt might be shot and herself shut out with David and the treasure within! That would be awkward. She was waiting for Robin, knowing that he would follow that shadow with unerring certainty.

Sure enough, as she crept up to the unclosed door from her side, the black shape of the big dog flashed into view from the other. He had gone round the house with his muzzle to the ground on the trail of the shadow. Straight into the doorway he went before Nell could stop him. With a spring she followed instantly.

There was some light within, because the glow from the stove was diffused, and a candle--Nell made them herself out of deers' fat with a cotton wick--was set on the table as she left it. By this mild radiance she saw, standing on the bearskin before the fire, a curious figure. At least, it would have been curious to a town-dweller, and wild, too.

It was an Indian boy, slim, and active as a goat, complete as one of the Braves--as the men are called--from the feathers in his parka to the beads on his moccasins. He took no notice of Robin--it would have been beneath the dignity of boy or man to show trace of fear of anything--enemy, pain, or danger. But when he saw Nell come in swiftly after the dog, he flung out his right hand straight before him, with the palm towards her. Nell instantly did the same thing. This was a signal of peace and friendship from him, and accepted by her.

Seeing it was friendliness, then, Nell shut the door, fastened it and then turned to this strange intruder. Robin had seated himself on his haunches in his own place and was looking gravely at the two of them as though asking, "What next?"

Nell knew enough of the Chippewa tongue to make herself understood, and the boy, of course, had caught some English from the trappers, but she knew also that it was not etiquette to ask questions of an Indian, however odd the circumstances, so she began by offering him tea and food.

"My brother's feet are weary," she said, "and his throat is dry, for he has come a long way in the dark. Let him sit down by the fire, and there will be peace and friendship in this lodge."

The boy, who was perhaps a little younger than David, bore himself with the curious reserve and caution of a full-grown man of his tribe. He sat down on the bearskin and watched her with the bead-like eyes of a squirrel--or a musk rat. There was no malice in the eyes, only intense curiosity, which must, of course, be hidden, by all rules and habits of Indian "bucks."

Women may be inquisitive, or surprised, but men must not be. Nothing must upset their dignity.

He ate the fried meat and drank the tea that she offered him, and Nell had a distinct impression that he was hungry. When he had finished he set his plate

on the floor by his side and spoke in his own language, and always in the rather poetical phrasing of his people.

"The meat is good and the heart of the Lizard is now warm."

"I am glad," said Nell, "the night is long and dark, my brother the Lizard journeyed a long way."

"That is so--but the Lizard is strong, and he has no fear in the dark, because he is the son of Ogâ (the Pickerel). He runs like Kee-way-din, the North Wind, to carry a message to the tall white sister with hair that flames."

Nell tried not to show too much anxiety, but she realised that here was something really important.

"I am glad," she said, "that the heart of my brother the Lizard is right towards me. Ogâ is a great chief, and one day his son will be as tall as the pine trees, and as strong as the grey bear of the Rocky Mountains."

The jet black eyes of the boy glittered with approval of this sentiment. He sat up rigidly, expanding his chest with pride, then he answered:

"The Lizard has a sister and her name is Shines-in-the-Night; when the sun was warm and the chickadee danced in the woods, the tall white sister came to the camp of Ogâ. She looked upon Shines-in-the-Night with the eyes of kindness and gave to her a necklace of blue beads, very beautiful and precious. From that time the heart of Shines-in-the-Night was warm--whichever way she looked she saw only the tall white sister with hair that flames."

Nell nodded, remembering easily the Indian girl with a paler skin than the others, to whom she had talked when she went with her father to buy some skins the previous spring. Also she remembered the blue beads which she had been wearing herself at the time.

"Shines-in-the-Night spoke to the Lizard, and said, 'Go to the lodge of my sister and tell her that the trapper from Abbitibbi, with little eyes that open only half-way, has a forked tongue. His words are not true, and his heart is black.'"

"Shines-in-the-Night is very wise," said Nell in a low voice, "I know."

The Lizard suddenly stood up on his feet.

"Let the tall white sister take the trail," he said, watching Nell with twinkling eyes, "then, when Little Eyes comes to the white man's lodge, there will be none to answer. My white sister will be gone, swift as Ah-tek (the caribou), and Moose-wa (the moose)."

A sudden presentiment overwhelmed the girl.

"When will the man with a forked tongue come from the camp of Ogâ?" she asked.

"He will come to-day--this day that is now awake."

CHAPTER V

"LITTLE EYES HAS A FORKED TONGUE"

In the stillness that followed this answer to her question Nell made a wild calculation in her head. To-day! The boy must mean to-morrow. She said so, eagerly.

"Little Eyes has a forked tongue," repeated the Lizard, with emphasis. "He says one thing, but his heart is false. He spoke to my father, the Pickerel, and he said, 'Take money for these pelts, and have all ready at the day dawn. Give me food also, for I go on the home trail in the morning.' Then Shines-in-the-Night said to me, 'Run with the feet of Ah-tek to the white man's lodge and carry this word from me to the tall white sister, for the heart of Little Eyes is not good towards her.'"

"How does she know?" questioned Nell.

The Lizard made a gesture with his expressive brown hands.

"It is clear to Shines-in-the-Night, as the face of the Forest, or the tune of the River," he said.

"Well," said the girl, with a sort of desperate firmness, "what must be, must be then. We will go as soon as the day breaks. I will wake my brother, we will eat and go."

"That is well," agreed the Lizard evidently satisfied, "the snow will hide the trail, and the great black ninnymoosh (dog) will be your friend." He looked at Robin with grave approval. There was evidently a sympathy between them, though the hound was not familiar.

Nell went over to a locker in which were kept all sorts of small articles and loose oddments, and extracted therefrom a strong clasp knife. It was a good knife, but, more important still, it was a showy knife. It possessed three blades of different sizes, a corkscrew, and a spike, useful for making holes or as a lever, for it was strong. She gave it to the boy, being very careful indeed not to suggest that she was offering payment.

"Will my brother the Lizard take this from my hand, in token that my heart is very good towards him? My brother will some day be a great chief and these little knives shall help him to skin Mak-wa (the bear), after the gun has sent him into the Afterland."

The boy's eyes shone as he took this unexpected treasure. It was a prize of immense value to him, and one that would make him the envy of every other boy for years. Nell was turning over in her mind what on earth she could send to Shines-in-the-Night--for she owed the girl a great deal--her action had been so clever and so swift, founded as it was almost entirely on instinct. She did not possess the things worn by other girls of her age; where no shops are people do not accumulate small matters of dress.

Swiftly she went to her room and opened a box. Turning over her few things she came upon a Christmas card shaped like a little book with a scented sachet inside. Just a very small cushion of satin with a bunch of mignonette painted on it, and a sweet smell of the same flower. On the outside of the cover was a picture of a pretty cottage and holly trees glittering with snow. It was a Christmas card sent to Nell by relations in a far-away land. She was fond of it, but she understood well what it would mean to the Chippewa girl, so she took it to the boy and presented it in a ceremonious manner, a special gift from herself to Shines-in-the-Night.

The Lizard was greatly impressed. Of course, he tried to conceal his wonder and admiration, because a brave must never be surprised. He hid it in his leather shirt, then he went, with startling swiftness and perfectly noiseless, and the girl found herself alone again faced by the necessity of instant flight.

It was three o'clock in the morning, and she wanted to be off in the grey of daybreak.

There was no time to make a careful disposition of the "greenbacks," or dollar bills. She took a broad strip of a pelt, cured soft as silk, tacked the two packets to it with strong stitches of her needle and thread, and fastened it round her waist under her leather shirt. It was the only way she could think of doing it quickly. Later she might invent some new plan. But it all depended on events.

Then she woke David, who grunted rather discontentedly, and then sat up in his blankets.

"What's the good of getting up in the middle of the night," he said; "we've done all the things, and we aren't going till to-morrow."

"We are going to-day, in about half an hour," Nell told him; "something has happened."

"I *say*--what, what's happened?" David scrubbed his face with both hands to wake himself, he was still rather unbelieving.

"I'll tell you while we are having breakfast," said Nell. "It's very queer and it isn't nice! Things have been happening all night, and now it's just about daybreak."

"*I say!*" exclaimed the boy again, "then you haven't been to sleep! What a shame!"

"Don't think I could have gone to sleep anyhow. I had such a horribly wideawake mind. Never mind, we'll sleep to-night--let's hope." She laughed and

went away.

Less than an hour later the little cavalcade took the trail.

Nell left the house in order because she could not find it possible to leave dirt and confusion. She locked the door outside and put the big key in her pocket. Then she nailed a square of paper on the doorpost, using a stone to drive in the nail. On the paper was printed:
GONE ON. E.L. (for Ellen Lindsay).

"Will he believe that?" asked David, speaking in a whisper, for the grey, thick chill of the morning's dawn rather oppressed him, though the flight did not. He thought the whole thing a mighty spree.

"Not till he's broken open the door," said Nell dryly. "That is the time I'm counting on, you see? He'll break in and hunt every corner of the house for Dad's money. When he can't find it he'll think I've gone on to Dad, at their shack. I'm counting on *that*, too."

"Jolly lot of counting, and not much really certainty," commented David, making a face. "How's he going to account for breaking the door open and turning the place upside down--I mean when Dad comes back?"

"Oh--he'll say the Chippewas must have done it. It's pretty simple, because Indians do break into shacks sometimes. That'll do for a story if nothing comes of his plan--I mean if he doesn't get hold of the money, anyhow. But you must remember he's laying out to lift that money off us somehow, and if he gets it they'll just vamoose"--by which she meant--"make themselves scarce"--"they won't stop to make explanations."

"Well," said David as he strapped on his snowshoes, "they won't get it."

"No," agreed Nell, "they won't. But they'll make a good try, because when people begin on a nasty job they get kind of involved and *have* to go on."

"Best thing is not to begin," said her brother in rather a sententious voice.

Nell showed her pretty teeth in a silent laugh.

"Come on," she whispered, as she fastened the harness on her odd steeds. "Off we go, Da, and God bless us all--Dad as well."

The fall of the ground was steepish, but the track was fairly beaten out, because winter and summer it was a path to the stream below. The distance was hardly more than half a mile, and in summer Nell went up and down often for water. In winter they went up and down almost as often for fish, as they had got an ice-hole trap in the stream, which was deepish, though not very wide so early in its course, its source being way up in the mountains at the back of the log house.

Nell's plan was quite definite. She meant to get on the "River" and follow its course to the lake--about thirty miles, perhaps more--cross the lake, get on to

the ever-widening river and go on at top speed till their river joined up with the Moose, when they might hope to hit on human habitations.

It was a reasonable plan, but there was one very serious danger--the possibility that "the bottom might fall out of the trail," as the language of the northlands puts it. In other words, that the ice might break and go down-stream--one moving mass, hundreds of miles in length, cracking, heaving, and piling up on itself. That happened every spring. The farther up north you were the later it took place, of course. A few days of sunshine, a milder feel in the wind, and the springs in the hills would begin to trickle into the streams, the streams into the rivers, and up would rise the bursting ice on the swollen water.

Now that was what Nell was dreading most of all. A thaw would make the snow clog, too; there was extra effort when the trail was heavy. As they darted down the hill she sniffed the air like a dog; the snowflakes drifting against her face were rather large and wettish, not like the biting ice powder that drove along in the winter.

A thaw was coming, but she would do this journey before it made the river road impassable.

Down and down they went, Nell hanging back her whole weight to prevent the sled slipping on to Robin's heels. David kept to the outside for the time, giving a hand to steady the load at the worst places. There was nothing top heavy or slack about the packing of the sled. They had been trained to do it to perfection--canvas cover lashed down at the sides as neatly as the mainsail cover of a well-kept yacht.

In ten minutes they had reached the stream and stood firm upon the snow-covered ice. The real journey was beginning.

They stood still to take breath after the scramble of that quick descent. Nell looked back at the track. It was covered already with snow. She felt a thrill of thankfulness that her hope was fulfilled. The marks of the sled runners were not quite gone in places--though they would be soon--but the trail of the dog's feet, and the digs made by the heel of the snowshoes when the weight was thrown back so hard, were already gone. The hard packing of the snow had helped them, and now came fresh snow and blotted out the trail.

On either side of them the banks rose fairly steep, and woods covered the banks. All the world was still and grey, and under the spruce firs the snow carpet lay smooth and untrodden-- dead white with the black boles rising from it.

Their road lay straight ahead by the frozen stream, and the one thing that mattered was haste.

David now took his place as leader. Robin trotted behind him in the traces, muzzle to the ground as he always ran, and Nell pushed at the back. Both she and David wore the round-toed snowshoes that most of the Indians use--not the very long shape like a boat, worn by the plainsmen, and the men who go on the long

trail over the vast snow expanses in the far north.

These shoes are made of the green wood of the tamarack, steamed to make it pliable--then the loop can be bowed into the shape of the snowshoe racket. This is bound in place by strips of caribou skin rawhide soaked in warm water, which also binds the ends together. When this is done the shoe is hung up to dry slowly, afterwards holes are made with the red-hot cleaning rod of a rifle which is used for boring, then webbing of caribou rawhide shrinks when it is wet and thus tightens up the shoe when other things would stretch.

Both Nell and David were used to this form of travelling and had long ceased to get the cramps and aches that come to people at the beginning.

Silent as the falling snow down the river path between the deathly stillness of the woods they flew along.

The journey had begun in earnest.

CHAPTER VI

GREEN EYES IN THE DARKNESS

So their flight continued all day, with brief rests for "changing horses," as it were. About twelve o'clock they were very hungry, and Nell decreed a short spell for dinner. They seemed to have the whole world to themselves. There was more brushwood and undergrowth in the woods now, not only fir trees, but many other sorts. More hiding ground for wild animals, too--but that was not a serious danger till the night should make them bold.

Nell unstrapped the little axe and looked about for a dead sapling of a birch tree; when she found it she bent it over double and split the bend with a sharp blow of the axe. Inside was white pith dry as powder; with this and dead sticks they made a small, round, red-hot fire, as the Indians do, first scraping a place bare on the edge of the bank where it was reasonably flat. Then they boiled tea in the billy-can, weak, but hot, putting a little molasses sugar into it to take off the bitterness. Some of this they gave to Robin when it was cooler--he was very fond of tea. For food they ate some pemmican and a bit of Nell's bread. They had brought what they could carry--which was not much, of course--then they would rely chiefly on soaked beans.

"We'll have bacon for supper," said Nell in a comforting voice. It went to her heart, rather, to see David eating the dried meat without a word of complaint; it

was not very tempting, because, though nourishing, it was rather tasteless.

Robin had dried fish. That is the main food of dogs in the winter. Of course, when a deer is shot, or rabbits and hares are trapped--or even a fox--they get meat, but you cannot depend on it in the snow time: these creatures get scarce, because the hunting animals destroy them.

Next time they camped it was late afternoon, when the dusk was beginning to shadow the silent forest. They were very tired. Not so tired as an inexperienced pair would have been, but certainly very tired and stiff--the muscles of the legs suffered from these long hours of snowshoe work. But neither of them said a word. David would not have admitted it for the world, and Nell was too thankful for the successful day's journey to complain about aches.

The night camp was a more serious affair than the "dinner" one. First they scraped out a wide place on the bank just below a high pitch of rock. There was a good deal of rock about in places which would mean rapids and waterfalls presently, all sorts of inconveniences to stop the pace of their journey. But in this position they were glad of it, because it seemed to wall them off from the lonely woods, also it made a shelter from the chill wind that moaned through the spaces.

Then they gathered dead wood. At least, David did that while Nell unlashed the load and got out the sleeping bags, the bacon and frying-pan, and big, thick stockings to change into in case their feet were damp--which always was the case, and might mean frost-bite or, at least, serious chill, unless attended to.

They regularly walled themselves in from the forest. On one side was the rock wall, on the other the sled turned up on its side, and so making rather a good barrier in between the snow scraped up into a high fence, while the fourth side was open to the river--their icy, snow-covered road. Not every part of the banks was convertible in this practical way. You could go for long stretches and pass only masses of brushwood and rocks overhanging the course of the stream, but this place Nell's careful eye singled out as just right for a night camp.

First, after this barricading, came the fire and collection of a fine heap of dead wood for the night. Then supper--fried bacon, bread, and tea; then the changing of foot-gear, and finally the two crawled into their fur-lined bags, feet foremost, and drew them up over their heads. That is the only way to keep warm, because otherwise the cold air is bound to creep in somewhere. If you cover your head as well, you may feel a bit stuffy, but you are not cold.

Robin, who had no bushy tail to curl round over his nose and toes as the husky dogs do, came and made his bed between their two bags. And then there was silence in the strange, lonely camp, miles away from a human habitation. The boughs overhead and the over-reaching rock protected them from falling snow, but every now and then a flake sizzled on to the fire. The light of the burning wood

cast a pink glow on the snow wall of their barrier, and with all the loneliness and cold there was a sense of comfort and even security.

Nell had arranged the pile of fresh wood close to her head so as to be within reach for replenishing the fire. For a time she could not sleep--in spite of the terribly long day just passed and the sleepless night of work before that. She could not throw off the feeling of responsibility, or that liveliness of mind that made her obliged to keep on following the doings of Jan Stenson in her imagination. Had they escaped him or would he follow?

Twice she rose on her elbow and reached out of her bag to throw handfuls of wood on the fire, both times Robin raised his head to watch her doings, and she saw the shine of the flame light on his deep-set eyes. David was sound asleep, jerking a little and making grunts and distressful noises, as his hardworked muscles reminded him of the day's labour.

Then the girl fell asleep, too, deeply asleep; and the camp was quite still but for the faint crackle of wood as the fire died down.

It was about midnight when Nell was roused by a low growling from the hound. It must have gone on for some time before the girl realised it, because she was aware of it in her dreams after a fashion. But she was so deeply asleep that waking herself was like coming up out of a well, by slow stages.

Then she put her nose cautiously out of her furry nest and gazed round. It was dark, except for the faint paleness of the snow, for of course the rock barricade made a blackness, and the trees were fairly thick above. Of the fire remained only a scatter of red sparks and white ashes.

Nell raised herself to a sitting posture, bag and all, and stayed absolutely quiet, looking about to realise what the trouble was, if any. She did not attempt to put wood on the fire even. She hardly breathed.

From somewhere close, but not on the ground, came a very slight crack, the crack of dead wood. This was nothing, because the weight of snow would break a twig any time, apart from the movings of grey squirrels, chipmunks or other furry things that made shelters in the hollows of trunks. She was not afraid. Indeed, she firmly believed that there was only one event that could shake her peace of mind seriously, and that was the knowledge that the trapper was really on their trail.

She was just going to lie down again when something made her look up at the top of the rock that shielded them on the side they had made their beds. It might have been ten or twelve feet--hardly more--and perpendicular, but a broken surface mostly grown over with the coarse grey tinted moss that deer eat in winter.

At the top, directly above the sleeping-place, shone two pale green lights. They were close together, and terribly bright and evil. They glared out of pitch

darkness on the rock top, and Nell felt a shock as she met fully the utter malevolence of the stare. Like the eyes in a picture that seem to follow the person who looks at them, these eyes appeared to meet Nell's horrified gaze, but a moment after she realised that they were most likely watching something else. Then she saw the something else, and that startled her almost as much as the eyes.

Attracted perhaps by the smell of food and the warmth of the glowing embers, another creature of the forest was peering cautiously round the end of the upturned sled. Probably it had been creeping about the silent camp for some time, and hearing no sound ventured to inspect farther.

When Nell had moved to sit up, she had done so with the ease and swift silence of any other woodland dweller. Now she remained as still as sleeping David, except that she shifted one hand very, very gently on to Robin's head--as a check; by the twitch of his forehead she *felt* his eyes watching. So they stayed, frozen as it were, while the searcher came round the end of the sled and stood still.

It looked very big against the snow, but the girl knew how to allow for the dimness and the uncertain jumps of light from the wood sparks. She was not sure if it was an opossum, a fox, or a big wild cat. Either of the two last would be likely to be hunting at night. Then she saw as it drew nearer that it was carrying some animal in its jaws. It had been hunting in the river bank close by and caught a rabbit, or perhaps a musk-rat, and the warmth had attracted it into the circle of the little camp. It was a cat. A wild cat, of course, one of the great strong specimens that the trappers called catamounts, and quite possibly mate to the one that had bitten Andrew Lindsay. It carried its prey with head held rather high, as a household cat carries a mouse, and it stepped with the same wonderfully cautious delicacy, the big bushy tail drooping. Body close to the ground it crawled forward, and presently crouched, growling over its catch, as a cat growls.

Robin's growl had ceased when Nell touched him. He simply watched in silence, having no desire at all to tackle a wild cat in fair fight! Unless he disabled the enemy at the first onslaught he would get the worst of the battle most likely, and in any case might lose his sight and be torn in rags. He knew all about wild cats and left them, and a few other unpleasant forest people, severely alone.

The girl was not afraid, for she had always heard that a wild cat will never attack first unless it is shut into a confined space or is caught in a trap. Out in the woods it will run--as a rule.

Crouching down, it began to eat the rabbit, stopping every second and staring round with ferocious menace for any enemy. Then it saw the green eyes on the top of the rock, and shrank into itself with a sort of spitting shriek. Robin shifted his position and pressed close to his mistress--the shriek was horrible, undoubtedly.

Nell became uneasy. She did not like those terrible eyes on the rock top, but reasoned in her own mind that the other animal--whatever it was--was interested in the catamount, and neither would interfere with her. Nevertheless, her hand stole to her pistol pocket and she got out the weapon, to be ready.

Now the beast on the rock was hungry, as forest creatures mostly are in the winter. It had been attracted to the camp by the smell of bacon, and probably been sitting up there for hours with the intent patience of a wild thing. The appearance of the cat had changed the attraction. Here was a rabbit, in plain view, and the sight of the other beast eating was too great a provocation.

The pale green eyes seemed to send out flames of rage, and a snarl came from the rock top that was every bit as fiendish as the cat's shriek.

Nell knew pretty well that she had only to throw a handful of sticks on to the smouldering embers to drive both wild beasts into hiding. But with curiosity was mixed a good deal of excitement. She wanted to see what they would do. They were taken up with one another, anyhow, and when you live in the woods, the doings of the creatures become as interesting as very exciting books. Never had it come her way to see a catamount defend its supper--or early breakfast--from a lynx; she fully believed the watcher on the rock top to be that, most savage, perhaps, of all the cat tribe.

CHAPTER VII

A MIDNIGHT BATTLE

For perhaps three minutes the two creatures spat and screamed at each other. David awakened, uncovered his face cautiously and gazed about with interest. Then he murmured:

"I say, Nell, just look!"

"I know," her voice was equally low pitched.

"What'll they do?"

"Oh, run away. The cat won't fight the lynx."

"Is it a lynx? Snakes, what a row! I say, Nell, that cat yells like a slate pencil with a bit of wire in it screaming down a slate. Doesn't it make your teeth feel gritty?" he giggled.

"Hush," warned Nell.

"They don't hear, they are jolly busy. Oh, I *say*!"

This last "I say" was caused by a new movement on the part of the lynx. It was very hungry, and had no intention of letting that rabbit be eaten by a mere wild cat if anything could be gained by interfering! Evidently it ran or jumped from the rock top to the snow barrier, for the two malevolent green eyes suddenly glared palely from the bank. Then Nell saw the dark crouching shape run round on to the upturned sled. She was sure now it was a lynx, she could distinguish the heavy, powerful hind legs and the bob tail, then in a moment, right across the faint glow of the fire, the flat, wicked face with the tufted ears laid back.

But the great wild cat held on to the rabbit. There was no time to eat, but it would not run, as, of course, the lynx expected. They are terrible creatures and will fight almost anything that does fight in the forest. Their teeth, and the knife-like talons on their powerful hind legs make them dangerous everywhere. Nell wished the cat would run and be done with it all. She put out her hand to the wood pile, meaning to throw some sticks on the fire that glowed dully between them and these dangerous neighbours, when David saw what she intended and urged her not to.

"Don't, Nell, it'll send them off with one jump. Do let's see what they'll do!"

"But, Da----"

"Oh, I know they are awful brutes, but we've never had a chance of seeing a catamount stand up to a lynx. Do wait!"

Nell gave in. All the same, she was not sure it was wise, and she kept a bunch of sticks in her hand ready to beat on the smoulder of the fire with them and so drive about a shower of sparks, supposing the fighters became too unpleasant.

Robin was uneasy, but he remained as before, just watchful. Both Nell and David knew that he would fight a wolf, but not a lynx--not if he could possibly get out of it, anyway.

The wild cat was drawn up into a hoop, looking like a picture of a huge witch cat. It was a picture, too, of rage indescribable, one paw holding down the rabbit, one lifted, as it screeched at the crouching lynx on the top of the sled. Every tooth in its stretched, open mouth was bare, and its ears lay flat and close. The face of the lynx was like a wicked mask in front of its hunched-up body.

Then, in a second the suspense was over, and the noise that followed was like nothing Nell had ever heard in all her years of forest life. The silence of the woods seemed to be split and shaken by the hideous yowls and screeches of the furious beasts as they struggled for a mastery. Most people have heard two cats fight. If that can be imagined at least twenty times worse, and in the profound stillness of winter night in a snow-laden forest, that is what the girl and boy heard.

The bodies of the two wild creatures rolled, bounded, and spun in one raging ball. No one could have told which was which.

David scrambled to his feet, bag and all, and leaned against the rock watch-

ing, too intent to notice Nell's actions. She did what she had wanted to do in the first place, threw a handful of dried sticks on the twinkling red ashes. Amongst the sticks were some dead birch saplings. These burst into a flame almost on the instant, and a rush of crackling light streamed up into the air, making the tree boles look pink, like the rosy tinted snow.

In that same instant Nell saw that the cat was uppermost, with teeth fastened in the face of the lynx. He would not give way, but the lynx was killing him by terrible strokes of those razor-like claws which were lashing at the soft underpart of the catamount's body.

This she saw in a sort of instantaneous vision. Then the leaping flame did its work. With one spasmodic movement the mad beasts fell apart. The lynx ran away, crouching close to the snow, with a curious hunched movement of his strong hind legs, and the great cat disappeared in two bounds, leaving a trail of dark stains on the snow. He was shockingly hurt.

"Oh, I say, why *did* you, Nell?" cried David.

"I wasn't going to have the catamount killed," said his sister firmly. "I loathe lynxes. Their faces are as wicked as demons. I believe they are demons."

"Cats are pretty well as bad. It was a catamount that bit Dad, Stenson said."

"It was in a trap," Nell excused the cat briskly. "Of course they're savage, they are wild animals, but I didn't want that lynx to triumph. Who got the rabbit? It was the cat's own rabbit."

"Poor rabbit," said David.

Then they both laughed. It was such a very mad sort of scene, as Nell said.

David walked round the fire cautiously and found the rabbit. There it was, left on the battered battlefield. He picked it up gingerly.

"If we knew where the catamount was, we might go to him and say, 'Here is your rabbit.' As we don't, Robin had better have it. He won't mind. He didn't get much supper. We've got to make our food last."

Robin did not seem to mind much, and so the other two let him finish the poor cat's find, while they divided a bit of Nell's bread between them. It was cold. They were both rather weary all over, but they laughed and neither one nor the other confessed to that weariness, for this was only the beginning of the trail.

Nell decreed just one more hour in their bags, and then they must break camp and get off with dawn. She got no more sleep herself, that interlude had been too strenuous. She lay warm in her fur bag thinking--thinking, as the dark turned into grey. Then she got out of her bag and started on the morning work, perhaps the most miserable and difficult time in the twenty-four hours of a day's trail. The stiffness had not gone out of her tired muscles, her hands seemed stupid with the bitter morning chill. But Nell said never a word. She was leader, and it was her job to keep the flag flying, whatever she felt herself.

Soon the fire was blazing and the billy-can hung over it to boil water. Then she got out her treat, the special secret she had planned for the two first mornings. In the bag with the foodstuffs and utensils she had hidden a tight-lidded can of ready-made oatmeal porridge. There was always a sack of the coarse kind at the log house, and so Nell had boiled enough--or rather taken what was boiling--it was always ready at home. Only enough for two mornings, but even that would be a help. "One wants breaking in by degrees," thought poor Nell as her blue hands stirred the porridge.

David woke and saw it; what he said about that surprise made things very cheerful. Later on there grew a faint pinkness, low between the trees. The snow had ceased to fall, and far away the sun was rising on the white world. Nell did not say so, because her principle always was never to look for trouble, or to express dread of a possible one, but it was a pity the snow had ceased to fall. Moreover, either the shelter of the wood made the air less bitter or it really was warmer. And she did not want a thaw--not yet. There was that long, long river road ahead, and though the ice would remain thick, a thaw would start the little streamlets in the hills, thousands of small springs would trickle down into the river bed, and that would set the water swelling and lifting under the ice.

There was the more need for hurry. That was the way she looked at it. So breakfast was eaten, the sled neatly packed, and the party on the trail again before true daylight.

The first thing they came across as they turned into the river road was the dead body of the catamount. Nell was sorry about it. The great brindled beast was so torn and disfigured.

"After all, it was his rabbit," she said again. "I hate lynxes."

"The lynx got an ugly one in the eye all the same," suggested David. "It's not feeling very lively this morning."

So they left their first camp and sped away and away again along the white road, eating up the miles. Their spirits rose after the first effort, because it seemed so easy. The stiffness wore off and they seemed to grow stronger. The only thing that worried Nell at all was the thaw. It made the snow soft, so that the trail was heavy, and every now and then they heard the tiny trickle sound that meant water from somewhere.

Again, supposing they were followed, the trail was deep and obvious. Of course, if the thaw continued the snow would go into a slush, but at present the track lay horribly plain, long ruts made by the sled runners and the print of Robin's feet.

However, there was no use lamenting what could not be helped, but it made Nell more anxious than she showed in her manner. They stopped every now and then to change places, and made the longer halt about twelve for dinner as before.

They were so hot with pulling that there was not the least hankering after hot food, which was a comfort, as the meal was made off pemmican as before.

It was late afternoon, and when they were beginning to get tired--really tired, that the first serious check came in the long hours of swift progress.

The thaw seemed to have ceased and an icy wind got up, moaning dismally in the tree-tops. The river, which had been always rather narrow, widened out within a sort of gorge of rocks and brushwood. The bed of it began to slope slightly in a long series of what would be rapids when the water was flowing, and then, on a turn, they came to the rocky dip of a high waterfall. Frozen it was still, of course. One mass of ice and snow. Rather a terrible place in the strange stillness of its hold-up. And everywhere rocks--rocks and steep, difficult places blending with the forest.

"And *now* what next?" said David, looking about.

"Let's look round first," his sister answered cautiously.

So they left the sled, and taking Robin they made an examination of both sides of the fall. This was a long business, but it ended in the discovery that the river made a sharp loop here, as well as a fall, and their best plan would be to drag the sled through the wood--down the hill, of course--cut across the loop, and pick up the river again about a mile below.

It was going to delay them some time, and both of them were too well versed in scoutcraft to think for a moment that it would confuse the trail or shake off a pursuer, because what they had done would be so obvious. However, it could not be helped, and so Nell, keen to get it over, decided to start on this overland bit at once. David was willing enough, but they soon found the business was a worse job than their worst fears had reached.

A yard or two at a time, and then it became a matter of going far round some impossible obstacle, cutting a way through impassable undergrowth, or letting the sled down a rock wall. And darkness was closing in.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MYSTERIOUS CAMP FIRE

Nell decreed that the second night's camp was to be here. They could not go over such difficult ground in the dark, besides which the only way to go was to unpack the sled and carry the load down piecemeal.

"So," explained Nell, "we may as well stop here now, and instead of loading the sled to-morrow morning we'll take the packs down on our backs and then carry the sled. It'll be easiest in the end."

David was entirely willing. In fact, any plan would have pleased him that did not involve going on just then! They set to vigorously to clear a place this time. It was a case of axe first, and then using their snowshoes to scrape aside the snow and tangled mess of brushwood. They were pretty well surrounded by rocky hillocks and dense undergrowth, but Nell was content. "We seem safe," she said.

Then, seeing David standing still, apparently listening, she asked him what the matter was?

"It's the frozen waterfall," said the boy. "Queer it is how you miss the noise that ought to be there. You feel as if the river was holding its breath, just for a minute, and then it would go--*crash*! Don't you remember what a row it makes in the summer on the rocks--you can hear it for miles. Nell, how many miles have we come, do you think?"

Nell thought thirty--in the two days. David was disappointed, but the girl shook her head.

"You've got to remember how the stream winds about. That's the nuisance of it all. If you could go to Moose River as the geese and swans fly--well----"

"Wish we could," said the boy, and then, "never mind, we are jolly lucky to have got so far. I expect we're pretty safe now, Nell, don't you?"

"Hope so," said the girl. She could not say she believed so--yet.

The camp was a success in that it was very sheltered and cosy, but the funniest thing happened to start with almost. The kit was unpacked for cooking and easier conveyance in the morning. Nell put the neat bundles of pelts in place for pillows--rather a good idea. The two had made a good meal of bacon, beans, and tea, and were sitting very quietly in the warmth of the fire changing their foot-gear and greasing their weary feet. It was a moment of peace. Robin raised his head and growled faintly in his throat. He was lying on his side, all four feet stretched to the fire and head close to Nell. She laid her hand on his ears, and then looked where his frowning eyes were gazing--something was pushing through the brushwood towards the camp circle.

In a moment it appeared, and with it came a curious dry, rattling sound.

It strolled along grubbing a busy snout under dead leaves and rubbish, a hedgehog--quite the most independent of all the forest creatures, because no other animal will attempt to interfere with it or risk being shot by one of the deadly spines of its queer armoured coat. Even a lynx makes a wide circuit round a hedgehog, because if he's angry and ejects a quill--or spine--and that sticks, nothing the wounded beast can do will get it out. The spine goes on working itself in

and in, and often causes blood poisoning, apart from the horrible pain.

Master Hedgehog trotted into the circle of light entirely unashamed, having no reason to fear any person. He was attracted, because the snow was scraped away and a chance offered of finding amongst the stuff underneath a few grubs or beetles as food in these hungry days. He routed about with his odd little pig-like snout, taking no more notice of the campers than he would have done of a bear, a wolf, or a skunk. No one could touch him. Nell laid a restraining hand on Robin, who was watching intently, but there was no need, the black dog knew all about hedgehogs.

Presently this very self-contained visitor trotted away into the brushwood, rustling his spines as he went. David laughed and said it was a pity not to have shot the little pig.

"We could have baked him in the ashes, Nell," he added regretfully.

"We mustn't fire shots unless we are forced," she answered, "that would never do. Do you remember the story Dad told us about that fox that tried all ways to get a hedgehog in snow time and couldn't? So he burrowed a tunnel in the snow and came up under the hedgehog and bit it underneath. Horribly clever, foxes are. I rather love them, don't you, Da? They are so clever."

Everything seemed to promise a peaceful night. The two got into their fur bags in peace and quiet. The night was still, there was no sound but the slipping of snow from branches, as the weight shifted a little in the thaw.

And then Nell found she could not sleep. She had that kind of busy mind that seems straining after sounds. The fact was she was anxious, though she would not allow it. Her mind was craving to get on, and on. She would have liked to travel all night as well as all day, but had to keep up a sort of pretence of ease and security for fear of worrying David too much. He would have taken it to heart, and the strain would have been too great, joined to the hard day's pulling.

Hour after hour the girl lay still, only moving to keep the fire up. She would have given anything to feel sleepy and to stop thinking. She could not forget those precious leather bags that she felt against her side; the presence of them forced her to keep on thinking about the long miles ahead before she could put them in safety.

Presently something else began to disturb her. That queer feeling of certainty that someone is near. She heard no special sound, yet the sense of a presence grew and grew till the commonest noises made her jump. When the faint grey of dawn began to creep around the little camp, she crawled out of her bag and stood up. Robin sprang up too and shook himself, then he stretched a very long stretch and yawned, looking at his mistress in an interested way.

Nell took him by the ears and whispered to him that he must stop and look after David. She was going a very short way, but he must guard the camp. Robin

sank down against the boy's side with a sigh. He wanted to go, but he knew his duty. The girl looked to the priming of her pistol, then she stole away alone, into the forest.

She made a circle round the camp, and when she came to her starting-point followed on again in a still wider circle. After that the high rocks forming the gates of the waterfall stopped a complete circle. She turned and went back outside her own track.

It was difficult, because of the roughness, but she persevered, to be rewarded, for quite suddenly she came upon the ashes of a little camp fire. Kneeling down she felt the patch, the ashes were still warm.

The place lay to the north-west of their own camp--that was, on the back track behind them. Whoever made that fire was following the sled pullers most likely and was travelling light himself, for there was no trace of sled runners. Nell sought very anxiously for his trail both to and from the fire, but it was purposely confused--concealed in the shrewdest way. Just here and there Nell saw obvious "spoor" of human passage. Then it was gone.

The fire was very small and round, showing the camp of a "sour-dough," as an experienced hand is called in the north. But no more could she feel certain of. There was another very odd thing. It did not appear that this traveller had found the camp of the fugitives. He had stopped for the night in this place, and presumably gone on before the break of day.

The girl comforted herself with this reflection. It might be a trapper on his own business passing from one district to another, but unconscious of her and David. She would have liked to go back along the river trail to look for his spoor, but time was pressing seriously. As she went "home" with flying feet she cogitated whether it would be wise to tell David, and ended in telling him. After all, they were doing the job in partnership!

She woke him from sound sleep when she got in, and told him while the fire was burning up. He said nothing for a few minutes. Then he made a practical suggestion.

"If we take Robin to that camp fire and start him on the scent, he'll follow it up and be on the man all right."

"But," said Nell firmly, "we are running away from the trapper. What's the sense of going after him?"

David began to laugh, and laughed so much in a silent and suppressed manner that he rolled over. Robin looked at them both with such a puzzled gaze under his frowning forehead that it made them both laugh the more. After that they felt better, and decided to go ahead, thanking God if the man had passed them and gone racing on under a misapprehension. There was a lot of heavy work to do in the portage of the sled and packs, Nell knew they would not gain very much in

distance--the pursuer might, of course, get on miles before them.

Snowshoes were very little use at the present, so they slung them on their backs in readiness, and after breakfast made tracks for the lower reach of the river, carrying the bundles of pelts. The stream was winding and very rugged altogether. The first falls were followed by another wild and rocky gorge, where the water must race furiously down in summer time. It was some distance before the two could force a way down to a place that looked like a new start, and plain sailing, as it were, for the fresh road. But they did come to it at last, and the snow was smooth and spotless. No one had been before them, certainly, on the river.

They put the bundles in safety and went back. The way back did not seem so far--it never does, even in a land of roads. The camp was untouched, and again they loaded themselves with as much as they could carry. Finally they returned for the sled and the sleeping bags. Then Robin went with them. Up till then he had been guarding the family property, much against his will, but duty demanded the sacrifice of his feelings.

Then, after a rest and a meal, they started again on the untrodden road. Nor was it very easy going on a fresh trail of softening snow. They made themselves very hot, but they were hopeful and contented, because Nell was sure they would reach the lake that day, and somehow the lake appeared to them a landmark--a great gain--a sort of half-way house! It would not be half-way, hardly a quarter of the way, but at any rate it was a bad quarter, for the farther they went the nearer they must come to friends and human habitations.

It was during this tough bit of the journey that Nell told David about the post-house and the cache, that is to say, the reason before hinted why they had so little food with them. On the other side of the lake which they must soon cross was a small shack. Just one little room with a rusty stove and a bunk or two. It had been set up for the convenience of trappers in the coldest time, and was used by any of them going east to Moose River.

Andrew Lindsay had told his daughter that close to one angle of this hut he had made a cache. That is to say, he had buried in a small pit and covered over invisibly a certain amount of canned food, with tea, tobacco, candles, matches, and such little matters as knives, an axe, and so on. A trapper learns by experience that he may be left with nothing, so, like a squirrel hiding nuts, he makes his cache for a reserve store.

Nell was counting on this; moreover, it had more than once occurred to her that, in case of dangerous pursuit she might cache the money she was carrying,

but that would be decided by circumstances.

CHAPTER IX

HOW THE GREAT BULL FLED FOR HIS LIFE

All the afternoon they laboured on and on, and by degrees two things came to pass. The woods thinned, there were open spaces, the banks grew lower and more open. They were coming to the lake.

The other obvious change was in the wind. It had veered to the north and blew bitterly cold, while fine particles of frozen snow began to strike the travellers faster and faster. As it grew dusk the air was freezing hard, and that wind from the north was getting up.

Then, also in a moment, the white expanse of the lake spread before their eyes--dim and shadowy, lost in the distance.

Nell's heart sank a bit at that moment. It was all so fearfully dreary and exposed. The forest they had passed through seemed a friendly shelter beside this! But it had to be faced. The river passed through it and the journey must be taken up again--away over there in the far-away dimness--where the stream poured out, wider, going east to join the Moose River.

"I suppose," said Nell, looking round with carefully assumed indifference, "we'd better camp here. It's getting dark."

"Not much shelter," David suggested. "Hope it isn't going to work up a blizzard."

His sister was sure it was late in the year for a blizzard. She said that, but in her heart she knew that April was an uncertain month always. She stood looking and looking, while the blowing fur tails hid the troubled expression of her face.

"Come along," she said at last, "round by the north bank, we'll go--there," she pointed some distance along to the left with her fur-mittened hand.

David asked why not straight across--it was level and easier.

"Is it because of the trail?" he asked. "The snow will cover that. Just look how it's coming down."

Nell said it was because of the river stream. She was a little afraid of ice bridges, or holes under the snow. The stream in the middle would be swifter than the sides. You never know how the surface freezes, or where the strong stream begins to make its way beneath. The girl thought of all that, because she had been

here with her father and he had shown her what to beware of as the spring thaws approached. This was important, while David's mention of their trail was also a point. She decided that they would not go on to the lake, at present. They would follow a more difficult way around the north side and make a camp when they had put some distance between themselves and the place where the river entered the lake.

With this intention then they first did some confusing work. They struck out straight ahead over the snow; then, having gone some distance came back on their own tracks to the starting-place, took off their snowshoes and climbed the bank, lifting the sled over obstacles. It was strenuous work, but it could be done for a yard or two, and all they wanted was to hide their start. Having reached a bare stretch beyond brushwood clumps, Nell went back to obliterate the trail. In this she was helped by the wind, which, blowing harder and harder in icy gusts, whirled the snow round about in eddies, scattering it afresh in finest powdery flakes.

"All the better," said Nell, panting a little as she climbed the slope again. "Now then, Da, 'on, on we go,' as our old spelling book said--next thing is a camp. This blizzardy wind is beastly, but it's helping us all the time."

David agreed as he always did, bravely coming up to the scratch at all times in his sister's steps. All the same, he had never in his life felt worse--that is to say, more exhausted and despondent. The thought of having to set to again and make a camp, and a fire, if it would burn, and then face the night almost unprotected, was not cheering. However, Nell was right about the blizzard; the advantages made up for the misery.

As long as they could they went along the north shore of the lake itself, close to the bank. They returned to it, because of the much easier going, of course, after they had confused the trail by a land tramp of perhaps half a mile. That was awfully hard and could not have continued much longer, as their strength was giving out owing to the obstacles.

Presently, when it became increasingly difficult to see, Nell pulled up at a place where the shore formed some small protection, because the land rose in a slope with trees on the higher part. They could not camp on the ice here, so they landed in a likely place, hopeful of shelter from the snow-laden bushes, and began to make what preparation they could.

To tell the truth, even Nell could have cried at that moment. But there is a great deal in being responsible "boss" of anything! You can't let yourself go if you have real grit, and she had plenty.

They scraped and scraped at the snow till they reached down to the frozen bank and made a sort of barrier. A great deal of it blew back again, but that had to be borne. Fortunately the fire was kind enough to burn--the worst of the storm

had not come then--and they were able to get a meal of hot tea and bacon. It made a great difference. Then, protected in a small measure by the upturned sled and the bundles, the bushes, and the heaped up snow, they got ready for "bed." At the last moment Nell did rather a clever thing. She scraped the fire off its first place lower down, making it up again with a good bundle of wood. Then she and David lay down in their bags on the hot, dried ground where the fire had just been built. It answered so well that they both fell asleep at once in spite of the increasing storm.

Nell was very weary indeed. The burden was a growing one, because she had had so little rest in forty-eight hours of strenuous work. Therefore a cry from David close to her ears seemed to ring in her head for hours before she realised that he was shaking her shoulder and calling to her in rather an agitated voice, for him. Then she was awake on the instant. Wide awake and throwing sticks on the dying embers, for the one thing necessary at that instant was obviously a fire.

"It's *wolves*," David was saying. "But, Nell, they stop up north as a rule, don't they? I say, what a beastly row."

Nell was loading the little Winchester. She heard the "beastly row" very clearly, but did not show agitation.

"They are after something," she said. "Don't you remember once before when we heard them at home Dad said they'll follow some animal that is trying to escape for miles--a hundred miles--any distance till it is exhausted. They are so persistent when they are hungry, I expect it's a deer, poor thing!"

"Bucks are awfully clever at confusing their own trails though," urged David, who hated to think of wolves succeeding, "they'll jump thirty feet sideways bang into bushes to throw those beasts off the scent. I do think they are clever. I say, Nell, there's one good thing!"

"What?"

"Why the wind. It's blowing hard from them to us. That's why we hear them so plainly--don't you see? If it was the other way they'd get scent of us. Jolly thing they can't!"

"It is," said Nell decidedly, inwardly praying that the wolves would stay on the north side, but that depended on which way the hunted creature fled.

The two crouched low under the snow wall, waiting and listening to those howls that had roused David. It was a dreadful sound--the howling of the wolf pack in full cry after its flying prey. The weird shriek of it came down the wind in gusts. Perhaps the horrible brutes were at fault! Nell hoped so. David said so, he was anxious to help the deer if that were possible, but his sister preferred to remain entirely apart! One does not want to get mixed up with wolves on such a night.

The noise of the howling grew louder, and Nell threw a good armful of dead

wood on the blaze to rouse a high flame. She and David were standing up gazing anxiously over their snow wall up the slope of the shore, when suddenly they received a shock that was very startling.

Out of the driving whiteness of the blown snow loomed a huge plunging shape. It was lurching down the bank directly on to them--like a nightmare in a very horrid dream--when apparently it saw the fire, and checked. For a moment the two in the camp were aware of amazing antlers and a long distorted face, then the creature swerved with a fine effort, bounded aside with a loud blowing snort, and took to the lake some yards beyond, higher up.

"Did you see--did you see?" David was shaking his sister's arm in excitement.

"Don't, Da, I've got the rifle. Put more wood on the fire, quick. Hark to the others!"

"Poor old chap, he's got a start," said the boy, piling on wood and glancing back up the hill. "I wish you could kill the lot, Nell."

Nell laughed in spite of everything.

"I! Let's hope they won't notice us, if they're hot on the old bull's trail."

The weird howling drew nearer, till the bitter blast of the north wind seemed full of it, and then--sudden as the appearance of the desperate bull moose--shadows flitted over the rise as though they were part of the snowstorm.

Nell fully expected one or more of the wolves to come over the barrier, though she knew the fire would frighten them, but the pack, about eight or ten at the outside, were running close together on the hot scent of the big moose. Perhaps the fire did scare them aside, as it had scared him. The darkness swallowed them, and the fierce long-drawn cry of the howl lessened as the wind caught it. They were gone, over the lake.

When Nell felt Robin's coat she noted that his hackles were stiff and his throat quivering with deep growls. Robin could put up with most of the wild folk--after a fashion--but wolves made him furious! All three of the party sat down again close to the fire, and comforted themselves with hot tea and dried meat.

"Something happens every night," commented David thoughtfully; "this was the queerest. Who'd have thought of a bull moose down here--and wolves!"

"How can we tell how far they'd come," said Nell. "He looked awfully done. Da, his antlers were jolly fine--all of seven feet across. I expect he was an old bull and that they singled him out of the herd and kept him back from the others--that's the way they do."

"I do hope he got away," said the boy again.

Nell hoped so, too, but she didn't think it likely. Wolves are fearfully persistent.

After a bit they went back to bed and actually slept till a faint, faint pink light spread over the flatness of the lake.

The wind was less keen, but it still blew the snow about in eddies, and Nell was very eager to be off while this help was on their side.

She looked back towards the river and the far woods. Nothing showed. They struck camp very quickly indeed, for her hurry was infectious. She felt unsafe out here in the open, for figures show a long way upon clean snow.

They kept to the edge more or less. Not quite the edge, because there is always a good deal of rotten ice under the banks, but within a little of it. It was easier going, and of course Nell was not quite sure where the river ran out of the lake and onward. She longed desperately for that fresh start on the river road. It would be wonderful to have crossed the lake and be actually on the straight track to Moose River.

All day they drove on and on, stopping once or twice in likely places on the banks for a rest and food. This lake was not nearly so large as the Abbitibbi Lake, or several others--it was not so wide. Away over the snow they could see the opposite--the southern--shore. But they could not see the end. It was probably twenty-five miles long from the entrance of the river at the west, to its exit in the east, and that's a long, long way even on snowshoes, when you are on the trail with a sled, even a light sled.

CHAPTER X

THE CAMP ON THE WOLF'S TOOTH ROCKS

The dusk was falling again and the weary travellers were looking eagerly for the right sort of camping ground, when the most startling thing happened.

As the miles were covered a feeling of security was beginning to grow. Why, they could not have explained, except that they were naturally hopeful, even when tired--which was a good thing if you consider the strain to come still. They did not complain of the biting wind, or of the snow that continued to fall at intervals, because it was a help towards safety in their opinion. Certainly it was far more difficult to distinguish objects.

Nell gave a joyful exclamation as the right kind of place loomed just ahead of them--a wooded, rocky arm stretching out into the lake. Had there been water it would, of course, have been a promontory; as it was it offered a screen and some

shelter. It was much less exposed and hardly the place that a bull moose would gallop over or wolves be found on. It was altogether promising.

"Here we camp," said Nell, and David dropped his harness, stretching his arms with a sigh of relief.

Leaving the sled they both climbed up the steep and rocky bank, beating a way through snow-covered juniper bushes on to the wooded promontory. Above the lake and sheltered to a great extent, the place seemed ideal to their hopes. David began hacking a clear space with quick strokes of the little axe--a woodman learns that quick tentative stroke in the bitter north, because in the frost his axe blade is liable to fly into a thousand splinters like glass if used as it would be in a warmer climate--a sort of brisk tap, with caution. Nell went down again to the sled to bring up necessaries, for it was plainly labour lost to haul the sled up on to the promontory.

In so doing her attention was drawn to the dog Robin, who was not acting according to his usual rule, which was to lie down and watch while camp was made, waiting for his supper. He moved restlessly about, nose to the ground, this way and that, round, in and out, and presently disappeared among the underwood.

When Nell got up to the top again, laden with sleeping bags, food and utensils, David drew her attention to this.

"Some animal," said Nell; "what a plague! We must look out, Da, it might be a bear."

David thought it couldn't be.

"Bears are still asleep," he said.

"Not when thaws begin," Nell answered decidedly, as she cherished the little flame in the birch bark. "Just a breath of warmer wind and the old things wake up. Dad says you can't always count on them either, because they are so hungry and there's nothing for them to eat--no berries, no roots, no fish, because the streams are not free, no nothing. I hope it isn't a bear. Robin couldn't fight a bear."

"We should have to make polite speeches to it like the Red men do," said David. "Oh, what's the use of bothering when ninety-nine-to-one it's only a chipmunk."

The fire burned up and a cosy glow danced on the bushes that shielded the little open space. The snow water began to bubble in the billy-can. Nell was kneeling on the ground slicing bacon into the pan when from the corner of her eye she caught the movement of an alien shadow. She sprang up with a swift movement in time to see a shape melt backward into the underbrush.

Drawing her revolver the girl was in pursuit on the instant. David followed because she went--he had seen nothing himself. Nell dived ahead with the quick judgment of a woodswoman in choosing her path, and brought up suddenly in

utter astonishment within a few yards of the fire.

Motionless before her stood a figure wrapped in the usual Indian blanket, moccasins on the feet, head and arms muffled in the blanket. The only thing that moved was the curious roving glance of the black eyes--absolutely black and shining like a squirrel's.

For an Indian she was pretty, her skin being much lighter in shade than that of the average Redskin girl. After the first shock of being caught she smiled, showing most beautiful teeth.

"Shines-in-the-Night," said Nell, speaking in a mixture of Chippewa and English, "you are very far from the camp of your people. Is it wise?"

"It is wise," answered the girl, and her voice was very low and quite musical. "My brother the Lizard knows, and I also know, that the trapper Little Eyes has a bad heart towards the tall white sister. She has known only his forked tongue. His heart is very black."

"It is black," agreed Nell, "but we are not afraid, because the trail is lost and Little Eyes will try in vain to find it when he goes back to the log house of our father."

The Indian shook her head, her curious, inscrutable eyes full of intelligence.

"My sister is deceived. Little Eyes will not return to the log house." She held up one hand and touched three of the fingers of it with the other hand. "One sun--Little Eyes leaves the camp of my father the Pickerel and comes to the log house. He sees a writing on the door, with fire and powder he blows away the lock, and long time he searches in the house of my sister----"

"I *said* he would," muttered Nell to David aside.

"Brute!" said the boy.

Shines-in-the-Night glanced from one to the other, then she went on:

"My brother the Lizard has seen these things. I have followed the trail of my sister, while the Lizard went to the Abbitibbi River in the footsteps of Little Eyes. I say that he will not return to the log house. It is empty. He cannot find that which he seeks. Little Eyes has a quick mind, it darts like the head of a snake. He will come across--see----"

Suddenly she went down on one knee and made a little plan with bits of stick for the rivers.

In a flash Nell saw the danger. Finding that the girl and boy had not gone to the shack at Abbitibbi River, the trapper could start at once on a long slanting line to the foot of the lake on which they were now camping. He would argue reasonably that they had followed the course of their river, as the easiest trail, and must cross the lake to follow on down to Moose River. Therefore, the best--the most certain--place to intercept them would be where the river left the lake and went on again through the woods twenty miles to the eastward. He would not

take the trouble to chivy them all over the lake, simply because they were quite sure to leave it by the frozen river road, and there, where it was comparatively narrow, he was bound to find the trail.

If he arrived before they did, he would wait, knowing they had not passed. If they went by first he would see the trail and follow close on their heels.

Either way it seemed as though he must catch them.

Poor Nell, very tired, cold, and hungry, felt this blow more than she would have done had she been fresh. She looked at the bits of stick, understanding well how the two rivers ran, side by side, as it were, though so very many miles apart, over a hundred miles.

"But he can't do it in the time," said David. He had been watching the plan also with interested eyes. "Look at the miles he's had to go. First from our shack across to Abbitibbi, then, right away down to the base of the lake. Look at it, Nell, he couldn't do it in the time. Four days!"

Nell said nothing. She was remembering vividly that one strong man alone on snowshoes, travelling light, goes at least three times as fast as they could at the best, with the sled, and the handicap of inexperience on the long trail. After all, David was but twelve, though he was so big and strong, and that long day at the waterfall rocks had been a set-back, while the trapper was a very old hand and used to immense journeys over the snow in the pursuit of his calling.

Shines-in-the-Night stood up again, and made an eloquent gesture of one arm towards the distant southern shore of the lake.

"We shall know," she said, "when the Lizard comes across the snow. I said to him at the ending of the sun on this finger"--she held up her fourth finger--"the tall white sister will rest and make camp on the rock that is like a wolf's tooth. You shall come across and tell me, and our hearts shall be like the heart of the fox that is not deceived. And now let my sister eat and rest, for who shall say how soon she must take the trail?"

"Oh, I say," ejaculated David, "I thought we were in for a decent spell to-night." Then glancing at Nell he pulled himself together and added, "It's awfully jolly of Shines-in-the-Night to take such a lot of trouble."

"My sister's heart is very good towards us," said Nell gently. "She is brave as the cow-moose and kind as the wood-dove in summer. It is well for us, and we will not forget. Let her come and eat with us now, that when the Lizard comes we may be strong, if there is a long trail to go without sleep or rest."

So it came to pass that in a few minutes the three were resting at the camp fire, making a good meal, and shortly after that David was sound asleep. Then Nell, sleeping as she had not done for many nights, because of the sense of security given her by the presence of the Redskin girl who sat by the fire wrapped in her blanket, feeding the flame at intervals and listening with the acuteness of sense

that gave her hearing and instinct like an animal.

About midnight both the girl and the dog raised their heads to listen, and two minutes after they left the camp with movements noiseless as a musk-rat and went down to the edge of the lake. The Lizard came back up the bank with them. He did not say he was exhausted, or even tired, as a boy of any Western nation would have done; it would have been quite beneath the dignity of the son of a "brave" to make a complaint. He ate the food his sister gave to him, offering bits to Robin--the "ninnymoosh"--and he answered the questions she asked him in their own musical tongue, in low tones and few words.

Then Shines-in-the-Night shook Nell gently by one shoulder, and the silent little camp was roused to busy action all in a moment.

The Lizard had brought rather staggering news. So much so that Nell felt a sinking at the heart. Her spirit rose to meet it directly after, but that required some pluck.

It appeared that the Indians were right. Stenson had followed the plan they had prophesied and was, even at that moment, camped on the other shore of the lake, the southern shore opposite. Nor was he alone. Another trapper was with him, though, of course, the Lizard could not tell his name.

Then the boy said something to Shines-in-the-Night, and she passed it on to Nell.

"My brother the Lizard has seen the tall white man--the father of my sister. He is not sick, but he halts on one knee where the catamount bit him. He cannot yet go on the long trail. He is not troubled, because Little Eyes has spoken to him with a forked tongue and told him that my sister is well and content with a message."

"*Ah*," murmured David, with meaning, "just what we said, Nell! Well, of all the stinkers! But it's a jolly good thing that Dad's all right, anyway."

Nell agreed vaguely. She was thinking of the money tied round her waist! Whatever happened she would save her father's earnings, his years of work and labour, but certainly they were in rather a tight corner. Most people would have called it a hopeless one.

She looked at Shines-in-the-Night, who was two years older than herself and had all the shrewd cunning and knowledge of the wild bred in her by her Redskin forefathers. Nor did the Indian girl fail at this crisis. All the time she had been sitting by the fire while the white wanderers slept, she had been thinking out a plan, and it was formed in her mind, complete and practical in every detail.

Now she explained it.

CHAPTER XI

THE HUNTERS

The southern shore of the lake was flat and open. Down from far-distant hills the land sloped to the water, and for miles there were no trees.

From the hills, then, came two men travelling light, with just a bundle, each made up of a sleeping blanket and food enough for a few days. They came at a great pace on their long snowshoes, giving a kick forward with each foot and then pressing down on the heel so that the great torpedo-shaped shoe slid forward over the snow almost as fast as a skate might on ice. They were well used to this going, and not being impeded by sled, dogs, or goods there was nothing to keep them back.

They came down to the shore about the hour of dusk, lighted a very small fire of driftwood from the river edge and boiled some tea in a billy-can. After they had eaten some deer-meat they began to smoke. Not till then did they speak at all. They knew what they were there for and neither had the least doubt that they would easily catch the two children, relieve them of the money, and make off with it.

Stenson was the leader. The other was a big, heavy, stupid man--Barry Jukes. They had lived a hard life in the wilderness and had small conscience about taking some hundreds of dollars when the chance came their way. All the trappers believed that Lindsay had a large sum of money hidden in his shack. As long as he could take care of it himself he was not interfered with, but the accident of the catamount's bite had put an idea into the quicker, more cunning brain of Stenson--that was, to get the girl out of the log house on that plea, and then search it. To break in was a small matter, because he could easily pretend entire ignorance, and the blame would be laid at the door of some wandering Redskins, who certainly did steal at times.

He had made out the injury much worse than it really was, of course, to work on Nell's fears. He had come back much sooner than he said he would in case she took it into her head to leave, and she would surely have been caught at once had it not been for the Lizard's information that night. Because of that the two had given him the slip, but he was not much disturbed really.

He had proceeded to pick up their trail with the skill of long practice, and followed it down to the stream. They had a sled. That would delay them, he knew. Nor did he much believe in the powers of the two young Lindsays to keep up on the long trail without failing.

Therefore he coolly broke into the shack and searched it thoroughly. He tried the log floor, and presently found the joins in the wood. He prised up the log, saw the empty hole and understood what must have been hidden there. The conclusion he drew was, either that Nell had taken the money to her father at the Abbitibbi hills, where his shack was, or she had gone away with it down river. In either case he felt so entirely certain of overtaking her that he stayed at the log house to make a good meal, and fill his pockets with potatoes, which were very precious at the end of the winter when no green food was available.

Then he started away along the ridges to his own distant shack, his plan being to make sure whether or no the flying pair had gone that way. They could go some distance by stream, leaving it lower down, but the way he took was the shortest and hardest. If they did not come within a reasonable time he would cut across to the lower end of the lake and look for their trail there. He did not doubt he should find it.

Now we know that he did not find the travellers anywhere near the Abbitibbi, because they never went that way. But he was right enough in his calculation about the lake, and it was perhaps curious that Nell had not thought of that possibility. Had the brother and sister not been delayed by the difficulties at the rapids and the waterfall rocks they would have got ahead of the pursuers and passed the outlet of the river before they reached the lake. As it was, the two parties were opposite each other, but luckily the trappers did not know!

Jukes grunted assents to the other man's suggestions. It was all plain-sailing to him. They would take the money from the girl and decamp. Not return to their own shack, but divide the loot equally between them and disappear into the northern wilderness.

One name was as good as another to such men. They were sick of trapping and wanted money for a mining outfit. The summer was coming and all they had to do was to take the long trail up into the North-West Territory and over to Alaska. No one would ever find them, they thought. Nor did they propose to harm the girl if they could get the money without doing so, because the police found men at the very ends of the earth--when they really meant to.

This was the position as they sat and smoked, saying a few words now and then. Stenson had explained his plan. Jukes made no objection. At present there was nothing to do but sleep. It was too dark to do any good looking for a trail. They rolled themselves in their blankets and slept soundly, for they had come many miles.

They woke, of course, in the misty greyness before dawn, and presently saw the sun come up shedding a faint pink flush ahead. It was warmer. There was a soft air from the south and a glisten of wet on the snow. This did not please the men, because it would make the trail heavy, but it did not matter much, because the same difficulty would handicap the two who fled, especially as they were burdened by a sled. Breakfast did not take long, and they were soon ready to start.

Then Jan Stenson thought of crossing the lake straight across, to find out if the trail ran down it from end to end as the course to the river would lead. The two men launched themselves on to the snowy surface, and went away in a slanting direction towards the upper end. They must cross right over to intercept the track, if track there was. It was not so very far, especially with smooth going, the lake being hardly more than two miles broad, though it might be twenty-five long.

Three-quarters of the way across, Stenson suddenly gave a hoarse chuckle of triumph.

"Oh ho! So the quarry is on the trail!"

Jukes looked, too. They both stood still, gazing back along a very distinctly marked trail. Without further remark they tracked it backward for some little distance; it ran away over the snow towards the beginning of the lake, as far as they could see.

Snowshoes first, not a man's size. Sled runners, cutting rather deep because the snow was softening. Then snowshoes again, heavier in print.

Stenson was triumphant. He was always proud of his shrewdness and here was a case in point.

"Was I right--haw?" he demanded, and Jukes grunted assent. "Little Eyes" was certainly quite right in his calculation.

Having seen, then, that the trail ran from the lake head and was making eastward, the thing to be done was to follow it. Nothing could be plainer. It had been made last night, or even that morning early. Why, the racing pair could be but a little way ahead, it would be child's play to catch them! That was obvious.

Jan Stenson was very pleased with himself. He boasted about his own cleverness to Jukes as they took up the trail and followed on down the lake. For several miles they went and then found the trail bore away towards the left, to the northern shore. Still following on, they presently came to the rocky promontory and found here evidence of movements, finally of a dead fire and a camp.

Stenson announced that the pair had come down from the head of the lake on the previous evening and camped here. They must have gone on this morning, probably about the same time that the pursuers broke camp on the southern shore.

It was a hopeless position for the fugitives, said Jan Stenson.

After a very little while taken up in prospecting around this place, the hunters took up the trail again and followed at a steady, rapid pace.

The northern shore began to grow more wooded, and after a bit the end of the lake came in view and a belt of trees, thick forest again where the river left the lake and started on its way to join the great wide stream of Moose River a long way farther east.

It was just about here that Jukes declared he saw something on the snow, fleeing towards the mouth of the river. Stenson had not quite such good eyes, but he thought it likely enough there was someone just ahead, so they increased their efforts. The trail was now fresh and very distinct. Two pair of snowshoes and the sled runners. Because of the mildness in the air the snow was soft. The sun shone over the dazzling world everywhere, and the trees on the shore dripped.

When the two men came to the river head there was a sound of trickling water here and there, and the edges of the snow at the banks were mushy and rotten. Underneath was the force of the stream within banks, not like the broad and rather shallow lake. Before long the ice would heave up as the water swelled, then it would burst and go down river in a jumbled mass. The course of the stream turned in a curve through the forest and the trail was lost round this. On pressed the two men, and when they had passed this curve they saw before them a straight vista of perhaps half a mile, for in that clear atmosphere distance is shortened.

At the far end of it were moving figures, a little group going ahead at a good pace. Considering the distance it was not easy to tell about the persons in the group, but the low shape on the snow was plainly a sled.

On raced the two men, Stenson boasting still more about his clever calculation. He was very fond of boasting at all times. Jukes listened stolidly; he wanted the money, that was his point of view.

In another ten minutes it became obvious that there were two figures. A taller behind and a short one in front, bending forward to pull as hard as possible. The little sled ran smoothly between, but it was hard going, because of the soft trail. Stenson made out that Nell Lindsay was pushing behind, and the boy in harness. He had quite forgotten about the dog.

Presently they saw the girl pause and look round. It seemed that she saw them and spoke to the boy, who glanced round also. Then they went on as before.

Stenson shouted. He and Jukes were not close enough to see the figures quite distinctly, and he was not inclined to go farther on this trail. It would be better to get the money--there was no question whatever about the girl giving up the money, she would see the necessity of that--and start away northwards at once, this trail was leading them in the wrong direction.

After he had shouted several times the little party in front drew up and stood still, waiting; there was something in their attitudes that gave Stenson his

first "jolt," as he would have called a shock of surprise. In five minutes it was more than a "jolt," it was astonishment mixed with exasperation.

He and Jukes saw as soon as they came within speaking distance, a Redskin girl, rather tall, dressed in the usual winter dress of the Indians, which was not very different from his own. With her was a shortish boy, and between them was a hand sled laden with pelts. That was all.

The girl looked at him with the half shy, inscrutable gaze of a Redskin girl. Vaguely he remembered to have seen her, or someone like her. He demanded her name and business.

"Shines-in-the-Night, daughter of Ogâ the Pickerel," she answered in her own tongue. "I and my brother the Lizard carry pelts across to New Brunswick House by the farther river."

It was a deadlock! The trail, he questioned her of the way she'd come, was from the upper stream. It was perfectly simple, because the Chippewas were camped in the forest beyond Lindsay's log house. The trail was hers, then, not Nell's! Stenson could have killed these two in his fury, but he dared not; the Chippewa Chief would have killed him in return.

CHAPTER XII

THE FLIGHT CONTINUES

By this time it is understood what the plan was that Shines-in-the-Night put before Nell, when the Lizard brought news of the pursuers' nearness.

It was a wonderfully complete plan, because it included the making of a trail anew from the head of the lake and down the centre to the outlet of the river. The shrewd mind of the Redskin girl saw the necessity of this, because Stenson would not have been satisfied with a trail that began at the Wolf's Tooth Rocks. He would, of course, want to know by what track the fugitives reached it. The way they had really come the afternoon before, close to the bank, was partly obliterated by the thaw and partly defaced by the Lizard, who went back on it for some little distance till he had destroyed the connection with the camp on the rock.

At first Nell refused to agree, but Shines-in-the-Night made it quite plain that she and the Lizard would be in no danger.

"Great Chief Ogâ the Pickerel," she said impressively. "Once Little Eyes do

him bad turn never forgive. Him know that. All time Ogâ finish Little Eyes. Police no matter at all then."

It was true. Nell knew that the Red men never forgive an injury and never forget a friend. If Stenson had killed the girl, no length of time, no number of years or miles of distance would save him in the end from the vengeance of Ogâ.

That made a great deal of difference. She could not have agreed to the plan if she had believed it would endanger the girl's life.

So she and David accepted the generous offer and one curious thing happened in connection with this.

When it was settled, she said:

"You are very good to us, Shines-in-the-Night. Your heart is very warm and kind. We have not thanks enough to give you."

"The tall white sister has given me a great gift," answered the Indian; "it lies on my heart and keeps it warm towards her. So that no deed is too much for me."

She put her hand within the leather shirt that she wore under her blanket, and drew out, almost reverently, the Christmas card that Nell had sent her. A hole had been made at one corner, and a deer's tendon, such as Indian women sew with, was passed through the hole, thus hanging the card round her neck. As she brought it out, the faint, delicate scent from the sachet pervaded the air and made Robin lift his muzzle from his paws and wrinkle his nose with little tentative sniffs.

To Shines-in-the-Night this card was the most wonderful and beautiful thing she had ever seen. She believed it to be a miracle, too, a charm of great power, and she knew that the possession of it would give her a sort of status of honour above the other girls and women of the Chippewas.

Nell knew the Indians, but even she was surprised at the immense satisfaction this card had given. Just at a critical moment she bound this girl to her service with a bond almost unbreakable. It was a strange thing.

After that the action proceeded swiftly.

The time being little beyond midnight they had some hours before the camp on the south shore would wake. Nell and David took a small compact bundle each, simply the sleeping bag, a billy-can, a little tea and pemmican, the object being to travel as light as possible and cover as much ground as they could in the shortest time. The Indians gave Nell careful and distinct directions about her journey. She was not to touch on the lake, but to go along the north side of it through the woods and cut across the bend of the river on the land. In this way she was to travel quite ten miles of the stream, but always keeping in the woods. After that it would be safe for her to take to the course of the ice, they all thought, but it might depend on circumstances. About that time, too, she would reach the log house--the bunk house run up for travellers, where Andrew Lindsay had made a

cache. Nell was depending rather on that for enough food to keep on with. Haste being her one object, it was not possible to set a wire for a chance rabbit, and concealment being necessary, they could not fire a gun unless absolutely forced to do so in self-defence. A shot would ring far in the silent snow-laden woods.

So that was the plan mapped out by the two girls, and very soon after that they parted, Nell and David going off east through the scattered woods of the north shore, the Lizard and his sister going back west, also on the shore, and dragging the sled, until they arrived at a place from which it seemed safe to take to the lake again and come down the centre of it as described, making the trail that was to mislead the pursuers.

All those long hours till the grey of morning began to make the trees ghost-like, brother and sister went on and on with Robin. At first they felt the pleasure of going ahead without the drag of the sled, but about six o'clock they were very tired, and Nell decreed a short rest, tea, and a feed. They made a small round fire with great care, boiled some snow water for tea, ate their dried meat and gave Robin a bit of the dried fish they carried for him. No bacon. They must wait for the cache.

Then, rested somewhat, they went on again. They had reached the river outlet and were cutting across that part round which its course wound. This was about the time when Stenson was coming down the lake hot on the trail of the Indians, who were certainly ten miles behind Nell, if not more.

David was beginning to think it was all right again. He depended greatly on the Indian girl's ruse, but Nell was very anxious. She could feel that money at her waist every time she moved, and the responsibility was a burden. She had taken upon herself to remove it from the hiding-place, and she had a feeling that she owed it to her father now to carry her plan through, whatever it cost.

With this dread upon her she put off taking to the river as long as they could get on by land. But it was harder, slower going--the shoes caught in snags and roots unless they moved with greatest care, and a long swing was difficult.

About noon, and after another rest, Nell declared she'd risk it. They unstrapped their snowshoes, broke a way through the undergrowth and found the river again--wider, snow-covered for the most part, smooth going.

They had not come all this way without seeing a forest creature or two--a rabbit, a mink that was chasing it just as stoats do in England. The rabbit escaped, thanks to Robin's interference, but the mink did also.

The climb down the bank brought them up against the land entrance of a musk-rat's nest, a big heap of sticks and rubbish that looked so careless, but was so carefully made. They knew that down away under the ice was a water entrance also, and between the two entrances a nest most beautifully safe and dry which the mink was always trying to get at.

Nell and David knew of these things and had often seen them, but to-day was no time to wait and watch. Once on the water--or rather on the snow-covered ice--they strapped on their shoes and went on again at a fine pace, considering the thaw, which is most certainly a drawback if you want to race.

They had counted on reaching the bunk house that night, but they did not reach it, and they were faced by the inevitable night in the snow with no food but the tea and dwindling pemmican. It was not quite so cold, but that was small gain when the wetness was taken into account. Dripping trees and wet snow!

They would not make a sound of complaint, either of them, though they were dizzy with weariness and stiff in every muscle. They scraped a tiny camp free of snow, made a fire with bits of stick and dead leaves, boiled their water almost mechanically, and after eating all they dared of the food remaining, crawled into their bags and were asleep in a few seconds, the two, with the dog between them. So soundly they slept that no stir among the wild creatures on the banks roused them, nor did the faint ceaseless trickle of tiny streams running into the river.

The hardest part was waking in the morning to start on again in the raw chill of the thaw at dawn. No sun, of course. Grey mist, shadows, and slush!

"Never mind," said Nell, answering their thoughts, because neither had spoken, "we *must* reach the bunk house and the cache to-day. Then we'll have a feast and a rest, and a fire in the stove; they always keep the fire laid--we shall have to do it for the next that comes along when we go."

David seized on Robin in a sort of paroxysm of satisfaction. They rolled about on the ground together, and presently got up very cheerful.

"Da, you're a brick," said Nell, measuring out tea. "I *say*, we are short. That's the last. And only this to eat! Pity we can't eat Rob's fish, but we can't; it's like wood."

They made fun of the poor meal, the slush, the stiffness, and the long miles ahead.

"Come on," said the girl, and they had started before the sun was up.

All the morning they kept on, and then Nell began to recognise certain landmarks her father had spoken of at different times. The first of these was the narrowing of the river into a sort of gorge, the sides of which were steep, rocky, and wooded. David said it was a good thing they had no sled; that was the "bright side" certainly. But they had themselves, and it meant a landing, a severe climb and a struggle through a regular maze of undergrowth. They had to use the little axe, which they had held to as a necessity and carried strapped to David's back. Bad as it was, landing was the only way, because the river went down the gorge in rapids, and the strong stream had begun to force tiny rivulets over the snow.

About the middle of the afternoon, when David was very silent and Nell had taken to describing the bunk house, which she declared was close by, Robin

left them. He had become restless a little while back, following up some trail with persistence, and now he disappeared altogether.

"Never mind," said Nell. It was rather a favourite expression of hers, always meaning really "never say die!" "He can't possibly lose us, even if we lose him."

"I say, Nell, look at the big rocks and the jolly hiding holes up there." David waved a hand towards a sort of fortress above them. "If the bunk house turns out to be a frost we'd better come back here and hide. It would be jolly safe."

"Start housekeeping in a cave! All right, but what shall we eat? Robin? Or the foxes that live up there? We haven't even got a snare."

As they talked they came into a sort of rough track leading from the heights down to the river. The wood was less dense, and Nell suddenly checked.

"Da! Oh, Da! See--we are all right! I'd give three cheers only we'd better not! *There's* the bunk house, up on the bank above the stream in that bit of open--see!"

They both stood still, gazing their fill as it were. This meant rest, warmth, a safe night, food, and in the minds of both a feeling that the worst was over.

David made extravagant signs of joy--silent signs. Nell's face, which had been looking very pinched and years older than the fifteen she counted, seemed to plump out suddenly into roundness. The eyes of the two met with a sort of mutual congratulation, then their attention was distracted by a growl, and both looked to see the meaning of the sound.

Not far from them and on higher ground among the rocks stood a black bear. His little red eyes were fixed on them with a sort of malevolent irritation. He was very thin, a mere loose hide over bones, and the two knew that he had waked from his winter sleep in the caves and come out, desperately hungry, to find nothing to eat, and rather a comfortless world. He was annoyed.

CHAPTER XIII

A RACE FOR LIFE

Now any hunter of the great North-West Territory will tell you that the only animal, perhaps, that no man can ever count on is a bear.

The big white polar bear and the grizzly of the Rocky Mountains are always savage, most horribly dangerous. But the black and brown bears will seldom interfere with man; never, unless wounded, or with cubs, when there is plenty of

food about. The safest time for bears is perhaps in the autumn, when their cubs are growing up and they have quantities of berries, honey, and such food to eat.

Now Nell knew all this very well. She and David had often seen bears. She had no fear of them, at the same time uncertainty remained. And it was a bad time of year!

This particular bear had been asleep in the cave above. He had waked up with the ice still covering the fish, and small animals mostly slain by the foxes. He was probably turning over dead wood logs to hunt for beetles and slugs, but that is a poor meal to go on, after about five months' fast, and he was in a very irritable mood.

Slowly he raised himself on his haunches and sat up. Nell would have liked to stand still and watch him, but felt it would not do. She moved away, quicker and quicker, but trying to do it in an unaggressive way.

"Good thing we haven't got the shoes on," she said to David, making talk, as it were, with one eye on the big black bear.

"Why?" asked the boy, shifting his into an easier position where they were slung across his shoulder.

"Because I think we shall have to run for it."

"Oh no!"

"Oh yes," said Nell; "he's in a bad temper. What a nuisance!"

"Can't we shoot him?" suggested David, as they moved on with increasing speed.

"Shoot! My dear boy, with automatics! He wouldn't mind much unless we shot his eye out, and then he'd be deadly! Wish I'd brought the little rifle, but I thought it was safer with the pelts on the sled, it's so heavy to carry. You want something pretty strong to stop a bear. Dad says their skins are so thick. Bother it, he's coming. Run, Da, and don't tumble over the roots, whatever you do. Remember the bunk house is good and close. We'll get there."

"Where's that donkey Robin?" muttered David, but Nell did not answer; she was intent on this very tiresome adventure. It was fairly plain that the dog had found the bear trail and followed it to the cave. No doubt he was hunting up there among the rocks, and in a way she was not anxious for him to come till this was over, because a dog has small chance with a bear if it comes to fighting at close quarters. People have an idea that a bear kills by hugging, and will always squeeze his enemy to death, whereas the astonishing weapon it uses is the lightning swiftness of its *strike*. A bear strikes with his fore-paw--which is armed with terrible rending claw--as quickly as a snake darts, and he can break the neck of a moose or a buffalo with one smack. Nell knew all about this and she did not want Robin to come to close quarters, therefore she would not whistle, but ran on, David keeping up with her, faster and faster.

Now these two were very swift of foot, but they had been greatly tried for a good many days and nights, they were hungry and a bit spent, for it was afternoon; lastly, they were cumbered with their packs and shoes. They were handicapped, but fortunately for them so also was the bear, for he, too, was not at his best.

A certain great writer says that an elephant does not seem to be made for speed, but if he wanted to catch an express train he would probably catch it. A bear, too, does not look as though he could run, but he can, very fast indeed, and it took all the running those two could manage to keep ahead. Nell's anxiety was David chiefly. Could he hold out?

Fortunately it was all downhill, and they were very surefooted with long practice of running over rough ground. The bear came shambling on behind, grunting with anger.

"Don't look round, Da," ordered Nell sharply, "you'll trip up! Look where you're going! The bunk house is quite close now."

David did as he was told, knowing she was right about the tripping. A stumble would be death. Just where you put your feet mattered enormously at that moment. The bunk house was close--which was comforting.

What he did not realise, and Nell wanted to keep from him, was that the bear was gaining. Every time she sent a glancing look over her shoulder he was a little nearer. She measured the distance to the bunk house anxiously. It was touch and go; she would not admit to herself that it could not be done. What was the distance? Fifty yards, forty? Less?

And at that moment David went headlong over a bunch of snags half hidden by snow. He was looking round to see what Nell was looking at. Just as anybody might. He wanted to see what she thought and felt, because he realised great danger.

Nell sprang to him. He was on his feet in less time than it takes to tell about it, but the bear had gained. The girl glanced once at him and her soul sickened. His red mouth was open and his little pig-like eyes were full of mad rage, even the horrid smell of his rusty coat came to her on the clean air.

"Run, Da," she said, keeping her voice level, "run! We shall do it," but she was loosening her pistol in its pocket and getting ready for the stand that must come directly.

On the instant she felt a stab of dread, from behind came a sudden bell-like bay--the note of Robin on a scent in full cry.

He had been hunting round about the dens in the rocks and hit on the bear's fresh tracks. It was a beautiful sound, that deep note of the big hound, and to Nell it meant rescue, she believed. One glance she took at the wood behind. Up on the slope she saw the black shape of Robin, nose to ground, racing down on the track

of the bear--and his mistress.

He was galloping, tail high, heavy ears drooped forward. Again he gave out his deep bay.

The bear checked his speed, wavered, and then came on again, but without the terrible intentness of his previous attack. Being a wild creature he was aware of danger. Something was coming!

Nell increased her speed, if that were possible, and heartened her brother with a joyous cry:

"On, on, Da--let's get the door open, and then call Robin in. He mustn't fight the bear."

The difficulty of opening the door with the bear at her elbow, so to speak, had been the haunting terror. One couldn't do it. There would be no time.

She and David raced down to the door, just as the bear turned to deal with this swift black shape that leaped round him in the snow, keeping just out of reach of his death-dealing forearm.

"Oh, the key, the key--it's locked!" cried Nell rather desperately. "Oh, Da! Where did Dad say----" She tried to think. David was absorbed in watching Robin's assault on the bear, which was sitting up again, making swift smacks at the illusive black attacker.

"Well *done*--go it, Robin!"

"Oh, don't, he'll be killed," Nell expostulated in an agonised voice, while her eyes travelled eagerly round the door frame, and she shook the solid latch.

"He won't be killed. He's too quick," said the boy triumphantly. "Key? Oh, there it is on a nail under the eave. I say, Nell, look at Rob! He's a right smart one!"

It was true. Rob was tormenting the bear with great cleverness, but Nell was far more intent on getting into safety, and probably few people have experienced a warmer sense of relief than she did when she opened the door of the bunk house.

Not much of a place, but the relief!

She glanced round with a satisfied look, and saw four bunks--like the berths of a ship--on one side, a rusty stove laid ready for lighting, as the custom is the outgoing traveller must lay the fire for the one who arrives wet and chilled, a pile of chopped wood, and a rough cupboard. Besides that a heavily made bench and a table. But the joy of it! Nell could have danced round that very rough table in spite of her weary legs, but there was Robin to capture and a furious bear outside.

After that look round she rushed out again and whistled to the dog. Then she called. Robin was very loath to leave the great black brute, out of whose reach he kept for the time being.

He came at Nell's call reluctantly. The bear came, too, but with more caution as he was not sure how much he liked the log house.

Then the heavy door was slammed and locked, and the three sat down and breathed hard amid bursts of laughter. Robin laughed, too, as dogs do, his lips lifted over his teeth. His eyes said:

"What a spree, wasn't it?" and he laid a heavy paw on Nell's knee.

She stroked his black silky head with a hand that shook just a little.

"If it hadn't been for Rob, Da, you'd have been--well, it was touch and go when you fell over that root."

"Rotten thing!" said David cheerfully. "But you know it's not so easy to run for your life carrying a mass of things, and the ground all tangled up under the snow. Well, here we are! I say, how jolly! Nell, what will the old brute do?"

"Go away, presently," answered his sister as she kneeled to light the stove. "Now, then, first off with the moccasins and have our dry stockings, then we'll have a real decent supper. Da, put the fur bags in the bunks and bring those bunk blankets near the stove; we'll have it all hot and dry."

The first thing that happened after that was a discovery, and not a pleasant one either. There was a little food in the cupboard--tea and cocoa in tins, flour, and tobacco, and a small bit of bacon frozen hard. It was obviously the cache of some trapper who had passed here on his way down to Moose River, and as he would depend on it when he returned probably, they were in honour bound either to leave it alone, or put back what they took. Nell remembered with a sudden shock of dismay that Andrew Lindsay's cache was outside. He had described the place at the corner of the shack. Not trusting some of the trappers--with good reason--he had made a cache of his own. That would have been quite all right if the bear had not been outside.

They had to laugh and be thankful for the small supply in the cupboard. In the morning, or late that night perhaps, they would dig for "Dad's cache" and put back what they had used--also have another supper and a good breakfast.

They gave Robin his last piece of fish, and at the same moment remembered that it was not possible to make tea without water, or get water without snow, and all the snow was outside!

Long they waited and listened, their only comfort being the warmth of the fire. They were very patient, as people learn to be who live hardly and have to make, get, and do everything for themselves by the work of their own wits and fingers. It is not an easy life, but it teaches you a lot which is never wasted.

Presently, from the little window, glazed with parchment, they caught a sight of the bear sitting up holding in his arms a piece of logwood, which he seemed to be licking--for insects probably.

"Oh, *poor* old thing!" said Nell joyfully, and she rushed to the door with her billy-can.

Very soon after the smell of hot tea and baking bread made the log house

feel like home.

CHAPTER XIV

RIFLE SHOTS!

In spite of insufficient supper, a horrible trial when you are extremely hungry, it is doubtful if ever two people slept sounder than these travellers. The dry bunks and blankets, with the warm fur bags, made beds for a king. The hot tea and hot heavy bread, made with flour and water, were warming, and satisfying, too, with the bit of bacon. They were too tired to worry about the bear, which came back and prowled round the shack when the warm smell of food came out of the pipe that served as a chimney. Bears love bacon, which is why the great traps laid for them--drop traps--are nearly always baited with lumps of bacon or pork.

How soon he went away they did not know, for they were asleep, and they slept for ten hours almost without moving, and woke up to daylight filtering in through the parchment pane, and a cold stove.

They got up with reluctance, in spite of hunger. David would have preferred to stay where he was all day, and argued about it in a disgraceful manner, Nell said. She opened the door and there, close by, was the wide river, the white road leading to safety and civilisation.

Then the sun came up, hot and bright, and the snow sparkled in millions of dripping jewels.

"Come out and dig for breakfast," said Nell, "or will you do the stove while I dig?"

"Look out for the bear," answered David sleepily, "probably he's waiting round the corner."

But he wasn't. All was clear, and presently the two travellers were busy as bees digging for the cache by Nell's recollection of its position. Fortunately the ground was much softer, because of the thaw and the sun, while the cache itself was only just below the surface and covered chiefly by stones and rubbish. This was the usual way. Men did not have time or inclination to make deep pits, they just concealed the package from man and beast till they should come by again and need the goods.

The parcel was carefully tied up in dressed hide, so that the leather was soft. Tea, sugar, baking powder, and flour, beans and bacon. The latter was rather rusty,

certainly, but what is that when you are hungry! Probably it had been well frozen and was hardly thawed yet. Nell took it all indoors and smoothed the place over. They had been obliged to dig with the axe. They had nothing else, but it was not good for the blade!

Her plan was to eat well and carry on the rest, after putting back the little store in the cupboard. They would surely want it for the journey still ahead. She would divide the weight into two parcels wrapped in the skin.

Nell's mind was fairly at ease. If she had realised it, the reason of that was chiefly the warmth, the long, restful sleep, and the sunshine. Things look so different in different circumstances and nervous dread often comes with weariness and cold. She believed the danger was over and the journey on from now would be easy. It was not so very far, she reasoned, and the best of all was that every mile now might bring them to possible habitations, to farms even. They were coming down into the haunts of men at last. That meant safety.

Of course, all this work--digging up and smoothing down--then the stove lighting and wood collecting, then the comfortable breakfast on a table, with the water boiling hard by on the warm stove, all took time. Time, too, was taken up in dividing the food into proper shares for carrying away and leaving. It was at this stage that David suddenly made the proposition which undermined the plan for the day already settled.

He was leaning against the doorway, looking out at the sun on the river, playing with Robin, just as though they were at home up in the hills, left so far behind.

"I say, Nell, why do you want to go to-day?"

Nell stopped in her work of putting back the cache in the cupboard.

"But, Da, we ought to!"

"Why *ought*? We are perfectly safe now. It will only make a few hours' difference."

"We can't be sure of that. How about Stenson? We don't know where he is. He won't give up."

"He will. Sure as fate he'll catch the Redskins and the sled. He'll believe he has followed a false trail all through and he'll give up. Now just think, Nell, why on earth should he come on this way. He was bound to find them, and there you are! Why *should* he keep on coming this way with no trail to follow?"

It was true. Quite true and reasonable. It was most unlikely that Stenson should go on searching for a different trail over miles and miles of country when he had found the end of the trail made--as he thought--by the young Lindsays. Where would he look? It was fair and reasonable to conclude that he would be baffled by the young Indians and go back to Abbitibbi. The plan propounded and carried out by Shines-in-the-Night was a very sound one. She would go her way,

across to the other river which ran down to the Moose about parallel with this one, only some fifty miles of woods between the two streams. Stenson might follow her, to see what she would do, but he had no means of picking up the trail of the Lindsays.

All these thoughts, for and against, rose and sank in the girl's mind. There was really no reason why they should not take a very necessary rest for this one day and start at dawn on the following morning, but instinctively she felt it was dangerous. David said, "But why? But why, Nell?" twice. She had no very definite reason to answer with. Only a feeling.

Of course she wanted to stop; who would not after such a strain? The shack was luxury. They really did need the rest, and in a way there was a good deal to do getting themselves clean, tidy, and ship-shape for the journey to come.

In the end David won. Nell laughed, gave in, and began to make baking-powder bread with the new materials, stirring it in the billy-can with a stick. You can use billy-cans for so many things when you have to!

"On one condition," she said, "that we go to bed as soon as the sun goes down and get off really early, about four o'clock, so we can start before daybreak."

David promised joyfully. Whatever he felt in the morning would be another pair of shoes! He went off down to the river and came back to say the thaw was jolly well getting a move on things! The ice was shifting up the banks. In some places there was water as well as melted snow on its surface.

"Look out for bridge ice, Nell, to-morrow," he said, as he sat down to the table. "I do believe it's going out in a few days. Rather early this year, isn't it?"

Nell said it was warmer down here than up in the hills. There was a much greater force of water underneath, too, here than up at the source of the stream, naturally. And, after all, it was April!

"Once it begins, it always goes so quickly," she said. "If it will last for us, just two whole days more--we ought to get somewhere safe, Da, in that time."

"We shall," said David with conviction, and his sister put away from her the queer nervous feeling that would not let her mind rest entirely.

A great part of that afternoon they lay still in their bunks, talking at intervals, while Robin dozed by the fire. As it happened, this was a very good thing for all three! The odd jobs were done. All was ready, the wood to fill the stove with in the morning, and the packets.

About sundown they had a meal, and after that the grey dusk began to creep over everything. Soft, still shadow.

"Now bed," said Nell; "we've got no candles and we must be up about four."

The words were hardly finished when a gun-shot rang out sharp on the silence.

Nell started as though she had been hit, because her mind was still strained.

"It may be anybody," said David. Robin growled. Nell opened the door and listened.

From the wood at the back a voice said, loud and harsh:

"You would, would you? You'd be ugly, eh?"

It was Stenson's voice, and undoubtedly he had met with the bear!

"Come on, Da. Smart. We must get off. Thank God for the evening, and thank God for the bear!"

Nell laughed suddenly, a low, jerky laugh.

"Who'd have thought it?" said David. That was all. He was feeling the least bit guilty, because Nell had really wanted to go on. However, there it was--and thank God for the bear!

It took a very few minutes to clear out. The bundles were done up in double-quick time, and the rest was ready.

"Now then," said Nell, "and, Da, hold Robin; whatever happens he mustn't go."

David, strapping on snowshoes, agreed quickly, then he said:

"It's bad luck his finding the place warm and the stove still alight. It's a complete give-away."

"He won't find anything, unless he blows the door out. I've locked it and I've got the key," answered Nell grimly. "There's another shot! He's still busy. What a mercy it is getting really dark!"

Cautiously keeping the shack between themselves and the wood they sped down to the brink, out through the rotten ice and slush, and away on to the river. Then off, with all the speed they could muster, away and away, eastward again down that smooth snow-covered road, and the last thing they heard was another shot.

"I hope the old bear kills him," said David vindictively.

"Oh, he won't. Stenson's got his gun. But, Da, what a true mercy; if he hadn't come by the bear track he'd have actually walked into the shack and caught us going to bed."

"I'd have shot him if he had, as soon as wink," said David; "he wants peppering."

Nell laughed again. She had thought of that last resort herself!

Next time she spoke she said how splendid the rest had been. This was because she knew David was feeling a little guilty about it. Also it was very, very true. Both of them moved in quite a new way. The effort of that last day was gone; they were as fresh as when they started, and so was Robin.

Darker it grew and darker, till they went on with no light but the snow and a few stars, not the great shining stars of the farthest north, but stars that helped a little.

Nell was more anxious about the road underfoot than the skies overhead. There was always the danger of a flaw in the ice below, and she knew there might be holes--places where water had come up over the ice, places where streams from the bank running in made weakness. Nell had often heard stories of inexperienced folk going up north too late in the season, who had died a quick death because "the bottom fell out of the trail," that was the expression used when the ice road gave way under you and you went down and under the awful drifting sections of ice. And yet what were they to do? The river was better going than the rough shores which might be any kind of travelling, up hill, down dale, woods, streams cutting into the big one, every sort of delay and check.

It was best, she decided, to keep on, going fast, as long as they heard no cracking, serious cracking. If that began, they must land and get past any weak place by the bank.

"After all, we are not very heavy," she said, and comforted herself with that.

"*He* is," suggested David. "I wonder what he is doing now! I wonder if he'll break the lock of that shack, or if he'll hit our trail and follow up directly. Of course, he may have killed the bear. If he has he might stop to strip the pelt at once and come down to the shack afterwards."

So did David talk cheerfully, because he was refreshed by that good rest. Nell was glad to hear it. She also was refreshed and unafraid of the night, but the long, long road ahead seemed to rise before her eyes as they drove on and on into the darkness.

CHAPTER XV

IN WHICH THE ICE GOES OUT, AND THE TRAIL LEADS HOME

Now the reason that Mr. Jan Stenson turned up at the bunk house was not far to seek. It has been said he was proud of his cunning, and he was cunning, though Shines-in-the-Night baffled him by her clever trick.

He and Jukes saw the two Redskins cut across presently to the northward, going steadily on their way to the upper river. He would not interfere with them for the reason already stated. No good could come of quarrelling with Redskins. They never forgive. If it was after scores of years or over thousands of miles they would pay the score in full--ultimately. So he let the girl go and he and Jukes had a row.

Jukes taunted him with folly, and words grew very hot indeed. Finally Jukes went away by himself, saying he was going back to the shack in the hills. He went, sullen and savage.

Stenson was left alone, bitterly furious with the young Lindsays, because he was sure the first part of the trail was theirs, and he was equally sure he must have been hoaxed somehow. But how! And the presence of the young Indians was entirely surprising, too. He could not make it all out.

Doggedly he went back on that trail till he came to the lake. Then, as it was near midday, he made a short rest and ate some of his dried meat. After that he deliberately went back all the way to the rock of the Wolf's Tooth and began searching about there with care that he had not bestowed in the morning, when he had rather jumped to conclusions on first sighting the trail. Taken it all for granted, that is to say. Now he meant to unravel the mystery, and he came near enough to make a fair guess. Searching about with the skill of an old hand, he decided that the camp fire was not an Indian fire--too large--also there was far too much trampling up and down the bank for Redskins, who move like forest creatures. Then he followed tracks in the snow back and forth, till suddenly he came on the print of *dog's* feet. Then he gave a short laugh that was almost a shout. What a fool he'd been! It must be the dog's trail that proved the presence of the Lindsays. Why hadn't he remembered the dog!

From that moment he went hunting on a new plan, as it were. The Lindsays must have started from this promontory. He was sure of that. Therefore the point most evident was to find the start. From the fire he worked round, taking a semicircle on the land side and back again. By dusk he had not discovered what he wanted, but he believed he should, so he camped there that night and began again as soon as he could see well.

Of course he found the trail made by Nell, David, and the dog, right across by the north shore to beyond the first big bend of the river, where they took to the ice again. The thaw had made it more difficult, but such an old trailer as Stenson could not be deceived easily.

He found the fire where they stopped, and finally in the dusk, as described, he followed the trail up the steep to the neighbourhood of the bear's den. If he had not done that he would, of course, have surprised the two in the shack. As it was, the bear became, after all, a friend to the pair he had attacked in the first place.

When Stenson appeared the big black brute was in a worse mood than before. He was more hungry and he had smelt the scent of cooking that came from the stove-pipe of the log house. The trapper fired at him, because he was obviously dangerous and it had not occurred to him that the trail he had followed ended so soon. If it had, he would have been more cautious probably.

The bear, slightly wounded, made a dash for the man, who ran behind a tree and fired again. But the light was deceiving, and the affair ended in the bear retreating into the rocky fortress--to fight another day. Stenson, seeing drops of blood on the snow, decided to come again, kill the bear, and get the pelt; meanwhile he would go on down to the shack, which was, he knew, not far distant on this curve of the river bank. Therefore he presently came down to the log hut and found it was locked. That did not surprise him much, but he expected to find the key hung as usual in some place under the sheltering eaves of the log roof.

By this time it was too dark to see a trail, or find a small thing like a key. So Mr. Jan Stenson lost his temper, as he usually did, and blew in the lock of the door, as he had done to another log house not long before!

Instantly he was greeted by a smell of warmth and food. The little place had not had time to cool. The blankets were warm. The stove hastily filled up with fresh wood, already dry, was quite hot.

Stenson rushed out into the snow, and lighting a torch made of a bit of dry bark, looked about over the ground and found at once the track of the three sets of footprints to the water's edge--or rather to the edge of the ice.

He went slowly back to the shack, considering what he should do, and the final conclusion he came to was--a mistake.

He did not imagine that the Lindsays were but ten minutes ahead of him. Had he been sure of that he would certainly have followed on at once. The smartness of Nell's retreat was beyond him. He did not believe she would have gone off down river in the dark. It was unreasonable to suppose that two young things would have started at nightfall. Therefore he decided to follow his inclination, now he knew that they must be about six or eight hours ahead of him at the outside, on a direct course to Moose River and probably unsuspicious of his approach. He would make a good meal, take a few hours' comfortable sleep and go on again at dawn. He was travelling faster than they were. They seemed entirely at his mercy, for the river was wide and open, while there would be many, many miles of Moose River yet to cover.

Thus, while Nell, David, and Robin drove their weary feet on and on through the night hours, Mr. Stenson slept soundly and woke up before daybreak to finish the food Andrew Lindsay had cached. It was certainly not justice, but that has nothing to do with adventures, very often, anyway.

Later on he started, picked up the trail at once and went off down river at a pace that over-gained on the hunted pair from the first. Given time, and a clear field, he was simply bound to overtake them, and he knew it.

Nell was obliged to call a rest early in the morning. They had to light a fire and fry some bacon, which Robin shared. Anxiety was telling on her as well as fatigue, and her legs trembled with weariness. David was really wonderful, but

he was rather silent, and Robin's feet were a little sore. He was not used to so many miles of travel; ice particles got between his toes, and though he bit them out when the party rested, after so many days of irritation and wetness it had caused pain. He was a little lame, too.

"Oh, when will it end?" was poor Nell's feeling as they packed up and went on again. This time not for many hours. They had to call another halt which stretched to middle day. The sun was shining gloriously and the whole world was one sheet of sparkles. Had they been less tired, it would have seemed a glorious day to be alive on. The country was flatter and more open as a rule, but in places the woods came again, and the twittering of birds sounded in the dripping branches.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, David called Nell's attention to a line of willows across the low pastures towards the south. A very long way ahead, but still visible. Was it not a tributary stream, a little river, running into their own road? They both stood still to look and consider. It was--or might be--important, because sometimes a mile or two up these tributary streams a homestead would be found, a farm or small settlement. There was just a chance that it might be so in this case, the open country to the south appearing somehow to suggest cultivation, or they thought so.

Standing so, Nell looked round, and her heart gave a sickening leap as she realised the full horror of what she saw.

Jan Stenson, coming straight down the river after them. Too far off for them to see his face, but the short, strong figure they knew.

David saw also; his remark was characteristic.

"Well, we're three, he's one. We'll have to kill him."

"Da! He'll shoot Robin."

"Can't we shoot *him*?" retorted the boy fiercely.

"Come on," was Nell's answer.

The weakness left them in sheer excitement, and they raced ahead. Nell, thinking hard of ways and means, felt her mind haunted by the corner where the smaller river joined in. Should they make a stand by the willows? Perhaps pistol shots might be heard by someone and bring help. It was a very poor chance, though.

She looked round. Stenson gained very little. Their spurt had been useful. Now they were nearing the corner. Which should they do?

In the excitement of the race the condition of the ice had been almost forgotten, but at this point there was a loud crack, and then another. Nell had a feeling as though the ice beneath their snow road had swayed. Glancing at the bank nearest the willows she saw the whole ice line move and shift at the edges.

Robin was running with his nose to the ground as usual, but he checked

now with a whine of anxiety, and sheered off from the side where the new stream opened up.

"Follow Robin," ordered Nell sharply. "Not too close together, Da--the higher we are the better."

There was another crack, and behind the flying snowshoes a thin line of water oozed up in one place, then all was quiet again.

Robin sped on, choosing his path, and the two followed. They were so intent that Nell forgot her feeling about the other stream, or rather she abandoned the idea in the excitement of getting over that dangerous place. The only thing to do seemed to be to go straight ahead.

David was talking excitedly, and she had not even listened, because of her anxiety. But when they were going on safely again she said, "What?"

"Why, Stenson, Nell! If he doesn't land and go by the banks, he'll smash through sure as----"

"He'll land," said Nell; "it won't delay him much to do that."

"Not so sure," grunted David, and he kept on looking back over his shoulder.

Nell was just going to beg him not to do it, because it checked their speed a little, when he gave a crow of triumph and stopped short.

Nell perforce stopped, while in her ears rang a sharp far-away splitting sound.

Mr. Jan Stenson had reached the weak spot--and the ice had gone under with him.

From side to side of the river behind the two came reports, as the ice gave in all directions.

"Oh," gasped Nell, "what ought we--to do!"

"I believe you want to go back and help him out! I *say*, Nell, you really *are*!"

"But, Da, it's rather awful!"

"Oh no. Only awfully wet, and jolly cold. Look, he's got his arms over the edge of the ice and is breaking along towards the shore. He'll get out--in the end. Come on."

The last thing they saw, in far distance, was a figure crawling very slowly out on to the north bank. It did not seem to be moving in their direction. As a matter of fact, Jan Stenson made the best of his way back to the shack, having lost his gun, though he saved his life--by a very narrow margin! It would have been madness to follow the flying pair in his drenched clothes, with no means of making a fire, as his ammunition and matches were soaked. Better to get back to warmth and dryness--and start again to-morrow.

That was what he said to himself, but he did not do it. One of his snowshoes had gone in that struggle for life--and anyway, the river was not safe any more.

The young Lindsays went on for awhile without such haste, and presently

camped on the south bank. As they were collecting firewood and making a cheerful blaze they heard sounds of voices--several voices and the barking of dogs. Then appeared, attracted nearer by the sight of this little fire, three men and a dog sled drawn by six huskies. It seemed that Nell's instinct was right, and up along that little river there was a homestead and small farm. These men had been up there with supplies, and were coming back with pelts, on their way home to the nearest settlement on Moose River.

They were entirely amazed at the Lindsay pair and Robin, and asked many questions, but Nell, as always, was cautious. They had all heard of Andrew Lindsay the trapper. Nell told them he had injured his leg and she was doing important business for him. She must get to the settlement, and after that she and David would go back home.

"You can't go on the ice," said one man, "it's not safe now. It's going out all along."

"I know," agreed the girl, and David laughed.

No one saw what he was laughing at!

So those three went down to the settlement in good and safe company, and Nell deposited all that money in the local post office, for that had been her intention all through.

A very little she took to buy necessary kit, and then she, David, and Robin went back to the hills with the trader who was going as usual to collect pelts from the trappers in the far-away woods.

Going back was a safe enough journey, and did not seem as long as you might think, because of the relief of mind. Nor was Nell worried about her father, because she knew that the Redskin friends, Shines-in-the-Night and the Lizard, had long since gone back to the home camp and carried the news of Nell's flight to put the hard-earned money in safety.

And it was so. When they got back to the log house in the forest, Lindsay had come and knew the whole story. Nor was he kept long in suspense, for by the time he had mended his door and got all ship-shape the adventurous pair and Robin arrived with the traders.

Stenson and Jukes removed to another neighbourhood--they found it healthier.

And so presently did Andrew Lindsay and his children, when David had to be turned into an engineer. But the story of those two on the trail was not soon forgotten among the folk in the North.

THE END.

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